

Root, Vine, and Gnarly Timber: Chinese Furnishings made from Naturally Shaped Materials

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Since ancient times, sages and scholars have drawn analogies from the natural characteristics of gnarly root (树根), twisted vine (藤), and rustic timber (朴) to mark attributes of virtue and its cultivation. Roots represent an inconspicuous network that draws nourishment from the Good Earth to provide solid support for flourishing growth above; vines, the tenacious energy of vigorous and unimpeded upward growth; and rustic timber, mature wisdom that can only accumulate through the trials of time. The use of root, vine and gnarly timber for utensils, furniture, and objects of art has also manifested for centuries. Such naturalistically styled objects also suggest “return to simplicity”—a philosophical ideal that has long been hailed as characteristic of China’s ancient primitive cultures.

Although little has been written on the subject, an excellent essay by Mette Siggstedt entitled “Chinese Root Furniture” (*Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities No. 63*) published in 1991 explores the history and context of this unique tradition. Examining literary references and depictions in paintings, Siggstedt identifies the early association of “root furniture” primarily with Buddhist and Daoist traditions that existed in the Jiangnan region as early as the Tang dynasty and continuing for several centuries into the Ming dynasty. By the late Ming period, the fashion became popular amongst literati circles in the Jiangnan region, who were influenced by Buddhist and Daoist sages. And throughout the late Ming and Qing dynasties, the tradition extended deep into the social milieu; Siggstedt noted “the context in which root furniture appears drastically widened at this time, and we find a tremendous increase in forms, types, and sheer numbers.”

Over the more recent years, numerous related “root” materials have been discovered. Thus, expanding upon the foundation of Siggstedt’s work, this essay will further explore the traditional use of root, vine and rustic timber to hew objects of utility inspired from nature.



Armrests

The armrest was one of the earliest forms of furniture and also an early type to employ such naturalistic styling. An armrest excavated from a Chu tomb at Lindun (fig. 1) dated to the Warring States period (475-221 BC) is such an example. The essential form was taken from a forked branch and fashioned with three legs. The surface is lightly enhanced with carving and shaped with two small dragon heads—the light touch adding a charming appeal to spindly, animated form. The elegance form and refined detailing are far

from rusticity, and suggest a tradition that was already well established.

Lines from the 6th century poet Yu Xin (513-81) reveal the hermit-scholar life-style that was more commonly associated with such objects.

Reclining under the sun on a cane bed
Having girdled a classic text while hoeing the millet field.
With naturally curved wooden armrest,
And ancient untitled work written in tadpole script.

The “cane bed” (*tengchuang*) and “naturally curved wooden armrest” (*ziran qu muji*) reflect upon the idyllic, non-materialistic values associated with simple, agrarian life.

Juxtaposed to the casual, naturally-shaped armrest was the formal, belt-like curved armrest which is evident in imagery of deities and imperial officials. The two forms appear as metaphorical

subjects of a moral debate in a critical essay entitled “Hewing the Curved Armrest (*quji*)” (*Zhan quji wen*) composed by the Tang author Liu Zongyuan (773-819).

Among the trees of earth and heaven, most prized have been the straight ones. These were the ones selected by the emperor to build the homes and the nation. Solid were the beams and pillars, regular the thresholds. The outer corners were smooth and straight, the inner chambers meticulously decorated. The standard for the armrest-table was in accordance with a measured principle. The Confucian official relied on this to support his virtue. Those of recent times are excessively clever and do not follow the old patterns. They cut down the crooked trees, measuring with armpits and elbows. Abandoning the inked line, these decadent productions are fashioned as strange forms with crooked standards and feigned strength.

The “inked line” marks a straight line, symbolizing the rectification of Confucian official. That such naturally curved forms indeed had become even further popularized throughout the Tang dynasty is also suggested by the numerous occurrences in Tang poetry wherein the *quji* is romanced upon.



fig. 2

The use of this natural form continued for centuries. During the late Ming dynasty, Gao Lian provided more descriptive detail:

The curvature of the armrest can be obtained from the natural shape of tree branch by selecting one with a half-round shape. Those with three forked branches that can serve as feet are best; otherwise, feet need to be attached. It is commonly placed on the daybed either for resting the hands while kneeling or for use while reclining. The ancient expression “reclining with an armrest” (*yingji er wo*) indicates this type of armrest. I once saw the armrest of my friend Wu Popiao; the wrinkled surface and natural curvature was marvelous, and the three feet were also naturally formed; the surface was smooth and lustrous like yellow jade. Old Wu carried it with him whenever he traveled, considering it to be a precious treasure...



fig. 3

Wu Ruizi, also known as Popiao, was a Daoist artist/poet who wandered throughout the Jiangnan/Hubei region during the Ming Jiajing and Longjing periods. Accordingly, when once at the renowned Stone Bridge (Shiliang) in the Tiantai Mountains, he wandered deep into the mountain forest, braving tigers and leopards, and cut an ancient vine whose natural shape could be used as an armrest. It also served as a stand for his burlwood censer, both of which he carried along wherever he traveled. Such imagery is Luo Pin’s portrait of the layman sage Vilamakirti (*Jingming sushixiang*), who leans upon a root stand with a censer nested within its branches (fig. 2).



fig. 4

Such an armrest is evident in a contemporary period portrait painting by Zeng Jing. Therein, the renowned *literati* doctor Shi Ran (Pei Ran), who also enjoyed the circle of Chen Jiru, Lu Yingyang, Gu Qiyuan, and Dong Qichang, is depicted sitting on a daybed and leaning against a curved armrest/backrest of gnarly natural material while studying a text (fig. 3). The imagery recalls the lines written by Yu Xin one thousand years before.

In Wu Bin’s 吴彬 *Sixteen Luohans*, one figure also sits on the ground and reclines upon a three-leg armrest fashioned from gnarly branch-like material. The association of rustic materials with Daoist sages and *chan* masters is reflected in the Daoist text *Zhuangzi*: “Put away the carved objects and return to simplicity.” Such is the surviving armrest illustrated as figure 4.



fig. 5



fig. 6



fig. 7

Meditation seats

Buddhist monks and Daoist sages are frequently depicted sitting upon rustic chairs hewn from gnarly cane or fashioned from bamboo. That the many versions of the painting *Xiao Yi Securing the Lanting Preface by Deception* attributed to Yan Liben (601-671) all depict the old monk Biancai sitting cross-legged on gnarly cane meditation chairs suggest that the original painting may well have been similarly composed; the earliest version now in the Palace Museum, Taipei, is thought to date from the Five Dynasties period (fig. 5). The paintings of sixteen luohans by the Five Dynasties period monk/artist Guanxiu are also rendered in rustic scenes, and several have seats hewn from roots. And in the long hand scroll *Buddhist Images* by Zhang Shengwen (d. 1173-1176) in the Palace Museum, Taipei, the six patriarchs of Chan Buddhism are depicted on large meditation chairs of various styles and material; Bodhidharma and Daoxin (fig. 6) both sit upon chairs fashioned from natural branches. These hewn forms could be said to represent metaphysical platforms derived from natural conditions of life—constructions that required a purified vision to select from the entangled what was useful, and discrimination to remove what was unnecessary; their temporal nature also reflect upon the adaptive methods of the sage as well as the fleeting nature of human existence.

Such chairs continued to be associated with hermit sages thought the Ming dynasty. In an episode from the late Ming novel *Jin Ping Mei*, when Ximen Qing visits a local temple, he encounters an Indian monk sitting with crossed legs upon a meditation chair (*chanchuang*); the Chongzhen period artist who illustrated the scene depicts the chair as hewn from twisted cane and gnarled branches with a high arching back of woven cane. An illustration accompanying the entry for “meditation chair” (*chanyu*) in the late Ming carpenters manual *Lu Ban jing* also depicts a cane- or branch-hewn chair. By this time, such fabrications—like the armrest—had also become popular amongst the Jiangnan literati. Wen Zhenheng’s comments concerning the “meditation chair” (*chanyu*) also indicate that the form should be hewn from roots or cane:

Make [the meditation chair] from Tiantai mountain cane or gnarled roots to resemble a writhing dragon. On the rough hewn protruding ends, hang objects like a gourd ladle, bamboo hat, string of beads or an alms bowl. Moreover, it is necessary to polish the surfaces smooth like jade; they are most beautiful when the traces of tool marks have all been removed. The multicolored ones of recent appearance, with *lingzhi* stuck to the surface, are somewhat like 'adding legs [to a snake]'.

Wen’s unfavorable comments also indicate that such creations also had become fashionable throughout the social milieu.

During the Qing dynasty, it also become fashionable to shape wood furniture as constructed from gnarly branches (cf. fig 7).



fig. 8



fig. 9



fig. 10

Stands

Early references to root stands are much fewer than chairs and stools. When found, however, they are also typically associated with Buddhist or Daoist themes. An early illustration of a tall root stand supporting a basin filled with fragrant blossoms appears in the long hand scroll *Buddhist Images* (d. 1173-1176) next to Kalika (迦理迦尊者), a *luohan* who also sits upon a root-hewn chair. And in a Yuan dynasty composition of the legend of Boya playing *Gaoshan Liushui* for his friend Zhong Ziqi, Boya sits on a large rock playing the *guqin* with a root-hewn incense stand at his side (fig. 8). Throughout the Ming period, stands appear with increasing frequency. A late Ming woodblock print illustration depicts a sage sitting on a root stool facing a high root stand with censer (fig. 9).

An unusual and long root stand (fig. 10) was originally in the collection of the Ming dynasty literati official, playwright, poet and songwriter Kang Hai (1475-1540) who resided in Yangzhou. The remarkable natural form bears a number inscriptions, including a seal script inscription “flowing clouds” (*liuyun*) by Zhao Yiguang (1559-1625) and another by Dong Qichang (1555-1636), who described it as an “immortal’s raft” (*xian cha*)—two poetical renditions that capture the form’s ethereal essence; the piece is now called “flowing cloud raft” (*liuyuncha* 流云槎). The Qianlong emperor is said to have encountered the piece on one of his southern journeys, having stayed twice with Jiang Chun, the renowned Salt Commissioner of Yangzhou who owned the former garden estate of Kang Hai; the emperor also wrote a couplet in praise of the “ancient timber over one thousand years old”. When Ruan Yuan purchased the old Kang estate in 1842, he discovered the piece in neglect, covered with dust and riddled with worm holes. Ruan, who is well known for his poetic inscriptions on naturally figured marble panels, recognized the beauty of its form and immediately had it restored. Supporting feet were later added, and in 1958, the natural work of art was donated to the Palace Museum.



fig. 11

Staffs

In ancient China, both straight and naturally twisted staffs were symbols of nobility and rank. In Han dynasty imagery portraying the legendary meeting of Confucius and Laozi, the latter is frequently depicted with a cane made from a forked branch (fig. 11). They were also the mark of wandering monk; the Tang poet Qiyi wrote, “What object do *chan* monks most cherish? It can only be their Tiantai staff...” Exploring precipices and cliffs, a sturdy and lightweight walking stick provided safe companionship. And for the elderly, a cane with a carved *jiu* bird finial provided protection from illness.



fig. 12

Canes and staffs were made of numerous materials including wood, bamboo and cane. Of cane, that from the Tiantai Mountain region has been renowned for centuries. The southern Song writer Zhou Mi indicated that the region produced several types of cane suitable for making staffs, but the red vine from Huading Peak was generally considered to be the best. It was also called “ten-thousand year” (*wannianteng*) vine. The late Qing scholar Wang Tingding wrote these ancient twisted vines were found amongst the peaks and cliffs in the region; the tenacious growth was extremely strong. The surfaces were wrinkled, and after stripping the bark, the tonality of the material ranged from date red to golden yellow to chestnut brown. The locals sold them for coins of gold, and those that were over 8 feet in length could really fetch a good price. Because the natural growth was entangled and winding, the locals trained young vines along a stalk of bamboo to produce long, straight staffs.

The natural cane could also be manipulated and/or selected ignored to provide a decorative finial at the top. Gao Lian noted his appreciation for that had been chosen with forked braces or thick roots and fashioned or carved as *lingzhi* decoration (cf. fig. 12). The *jiu* bird was also traditional ornamentation evidenced from ancient times (cf. fig 13). By the late Ming dynasty, those with dragon heads had also become relatively common; noting such, Wen Zhenheng wrote, “Canes made of Tiantai vine are naturally twisted and gnarled, but those styled with dragon heads are definitely unacceptable!”



fig. 13



fig. 13

Whisks

The deer-tail whisk is ritual implement associated with sages that symbolizes their detachment from the “dust and dirt” of the world. The association of dust with the mundane world appears in the early Daoist classic *Zhuangzi*.

...a sage pays no attention to the concerns of this world, doesn't chase after profit and doesn't avoid harm, doesn't search for happiness and doesn't follow the Way, says something when saying nothing, says nothing when saying something, wanders in realms beyond the dust and dirt of this world...

The association of the dust whisk with the sage is also evident in the poetry of the Tang dynasty monk Hanshan.

white whisk with sandal wood handle
 perfume you smell all day
 gentle and soft like rolling fog
 free and unfettered like flowing clouds
 for rites it's suited for summer
 raised high it flicks dust away
 and time after time in the abbot's chamber
 it's used to direct lost men

In the late Ming period, Wen Zhenheng writes, “The whisk was use by the ancients for pure conversation; if today, one were to wave a fly whisk about in front of a guest, he would incur disgust...” In Chinese, a traditional term for the whisk is “conversation wand” (*tan bing*), indicating it is use when expounding upon ideas. The Tang poet Wang Chengzan wrote:

A piece of an old branch is good for making the conversation stick,
 Held in the hand, wisdom of the ages appears.

For the whisk, white deer tail or pure silk were most highly prized. The handles were variously made of jade, precious hardwoods, bamboo, and cane; regarding the latter, Wen Zhenheng, Tu Long and Gao Lian all noted the use of small branching cane that was twisted to resemble a writhing dragon (cf. figs. 13-14).



fig. 14



fig. 16

Ruyi Scepters

The *ruyi* scepter and dust whisk share similarities as auspicious emblems designating authority. The scepter has obscure, ancient, origins; cast from iron or hewn from hard jade, rulers also used them for protection; the form also served as a back scratcher. More commonly a symbol of nobility, the ruyi scepter was also termed “hand-held gentleman-scholar” (*wojun*), implying an external badge marking a ruling faculty rooted in ideal virtue. Similarly termed “bosom friend” (*zhiyou*), it also served as a virtuous companion to console and guide the beholder through trials and difficulties.



fig. 17

The Ming dynasty scholar-official/playwright Tu Long noted: In ancient times, the *ruyi* was used when giving directions as well as to provide protection from the unexpected. They were forged from iron and over two *chi* long with silver inlays or incised decoration—some extant pieces dating to the [Northern Song] Xuanhe period. These days, there are those made fashioned from natural branches or bamboo with jade-like polished surfaces; those without the slightest trace of carving are the best.

Iron *ruyi* fashioned as a branch of *lingzhi* were also popular during the Ming period (fig. 16).

The form was also embraced by Buddhism, wherein it was one of the attributes associated with the bodhisattva Manjushri (cf. fig. 17). And, while the fashion for naturalistically styled ruyi scepter was by and large popularized during the Ming and Qing dynasties, the gift of a ruyi fashioned from bamboo root (*zhugen ruyi*) to a monk is mentioned in the *History of the Qi (Qishu)* recorded by Xiao Zixian (489-537). Thus, the natural form also has very early associations with Buddhism.



fig. 18

The late Ming period artist Chen Hongshou (1598-1652) was particularly fond of depicting root and cane hewn objects in his paintings. In *Drinking Wine and Studying Texts*, a literati figure kneels in front of a long low table upon which rests a long, serpentine *ruyi* that was rustically fashioned from twisted cane (fig. 18). And amongst the series of paintings depicting the Concubines of the Yongzheng Emperor, one of the beautiful ladies is portrayed on a garden terrace holding a elegantly styled ruyi of branching *lingzhi*.



fig. 19



fig. 20

Root furniture in the Qing dynasty

Up to the Qing dynasty, the use of hewn branches and root to make furniture largely appears amongst the hermetic traditions within Buddhism and Daoism, as well as Ming dynasty literati traditions in the Jiangnan region. However, during the early Qing period, such root and cane-hewn fabrications make unprecedented appearance in the palace court paintings—reflecting the strong influence of the Jiangnan literati culture upon the newly established Manchu court. An album leaf painting depicts the Yongzheng emperor sitting upon a cane-hewn chair in an elegantly furnished studio (fig. 19). A long low root table is also depicted in another album leaf painting portraying Yongzheng quietly reading in front of a brazier; the low root table at his side is set out with food and wine. Two well known paintings of Qianlong *Gazing at the Autumn Moon* (*Qianlong zhongqui shang yue*) and *At Leisure with his Children* (*Suichao xingle tu*) also portray the emperor seated in cane-hewn chairs. Throughout the eighteenth century, court painters, such as Leng Mei, Ding Guanpeng, Jiao Bingzhen, Jin Tingbiao, etc, frequently depicted root furniture in palace environs, leaving a record of its unprecedented use within the Imperial realm. Root furniture became increasingly popular throughout the late Qing period, as evidenced in works of the Suzhou artist Wu Youru (cf. fig 20) and many others.

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