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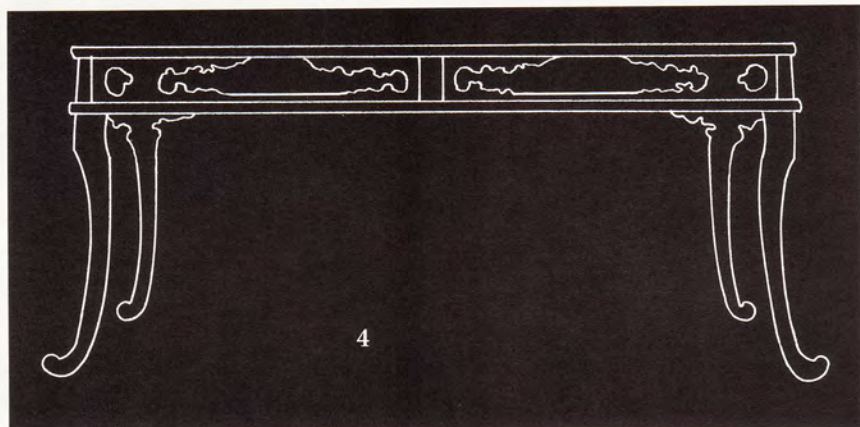
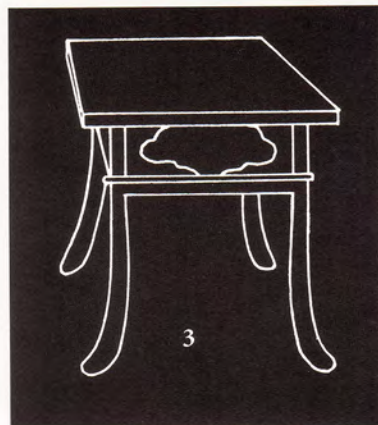
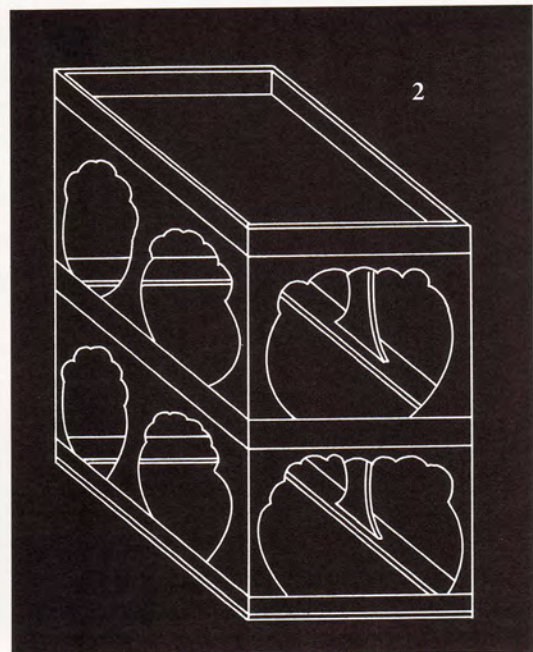
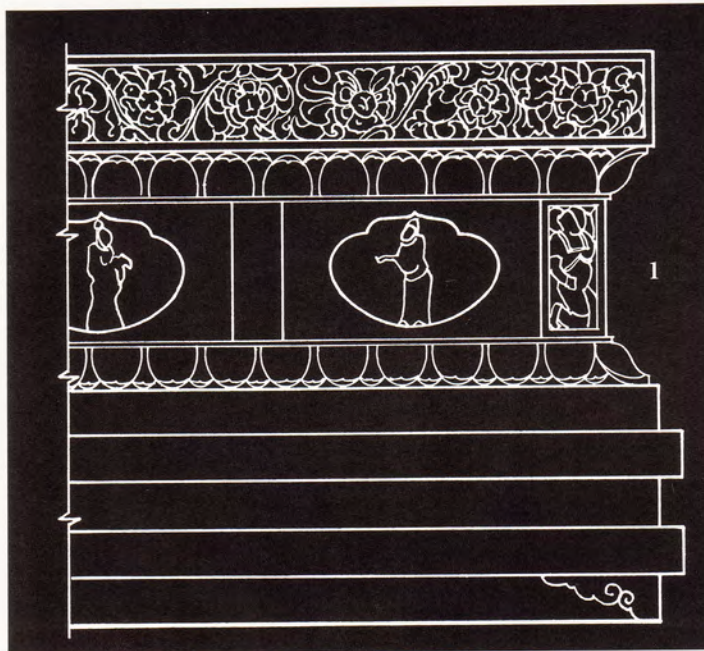
Curtis Evarts Media Links

The Development of the Waisted Form And Variations in Its Joinery

Curtis Evarts

As in Western furniture and interior design, many elements of Chinese furniture design find their roots in classical architecture. Gustav Ecke was the first to suggest that waisted furniture design may

have developed from early box type construction. Nearly forty years later, Wang Shixiang further traced the design of the waist, with its additional molding in Chinese furniture, to the construction of



the *zumizuo* pedestal. This form, which accompanied Buddhism when it was introduced to China, is generally considered to have originated from the architecture of classical Greece. It traveled through the Middle East to Gandhara, and then from India to China along trade routes and with returning Buddhist pilgrim monks (Rawson 39-62). Originally rich in ornamentation, the *zumizuo* was the seat of Buddha and was named after his sanctuary, a Himalayan mountain known as Zumi Mountain. The commonly used *zumizuo* form (fig. 1) retains the characteristics of the Greek pedestal, with its central portion (*suoyao*) set back from the front and a cyma reversa molding (*tuosai*) easing its connection with the base, which was often decorated with lotus petal designs. Although the *zumizuo* form eventually lost its original religious significance, it continued to be used as a

Facing page

Fig 1 Drawing of *zumizuo* pedestal After Liu, p. 98.

Fig 2 Drawing of gaming table after Chou Fang "Ladies Playing Double Sixes," Song dynasty (tenth century). Freer Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

Fig 3. Drawing of a small waisted table, Shōsōin Nara, Japan. After Kimura Norimitsu fig 43.

Fig 4. Drawing of cabriole-leg table, Southern Song dynasty c. 1200). After Ecke, "Further Notes."

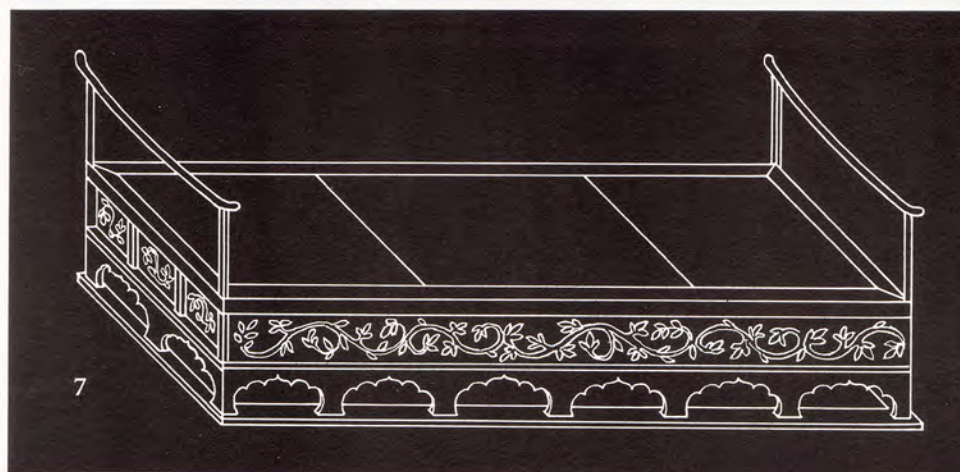
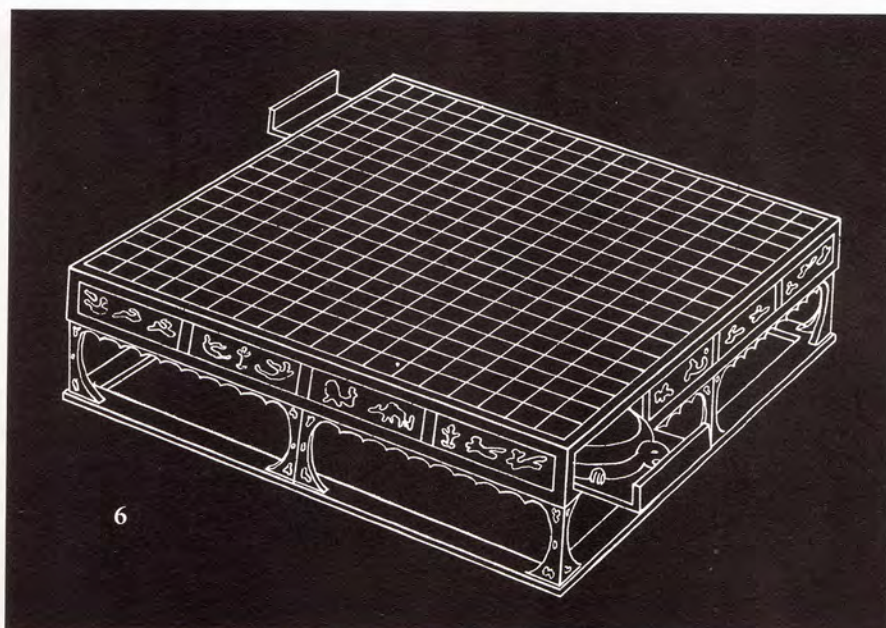
Below:

Fig 5. Drawing of *zumizuo* pedestal from Jin dynasty 1115-1234 tomb scene Honan. After Laing fig 24.

Fig 6. Drawing of a zitan gaming table, Shōsōin, Nara, Japan After Kimura Norimitsu, fig 85.

Fig 7 Drawing of platform daybed after "Southern Tang Emperor Playing Weiqi" Song dynasty eleventh century). Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Fig 8. Drawing of bas-relief Tomb 1 Houma, Shanxi province, 1210-12. After Laing, fig 23.



convention that lent dignity and symbolic meaning to the objects or buildings above it. The waisted furniture form that came to maturity in the Ming dynasty—exemplified in the *huanghuali* side table in the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, Renaissance, California (see cover)—can be seen as a blend of the *zumizuo* pedestal and early box construction.

A very early example of this integration is found in a gilt-bronze Buddhist sculpture from the Northern Wei period (A.D. 386-534) (fig. 9). The bold, yet finely decorated pedestal upon which the Sakyamuni Buddha sits, with its constricted waist above an open box platform, precedes the mature waisted furniture style of the Ming dynasty by nearly a millennium. In addition to Gustav Ecke's theory of evolution of waisted furniture from the box platform, we may also



assume that there was some logical development and integration of the waist itself. From the small body of datable evidence available in pictorial references, treasures from the Tang dynasty preserved at the Shōsōin, and excavated tomb material, it is clear that the recessed leg formula and the platform style, which was derived from early box construction, dominated furniture design for everyday use until the fifteenth century (Ming dynasty). There are, however, scattered traces of the waisted style developing by a variety of means, together with the gradual change in seat elevation that occurred over seven to eight centuries.

In a well known painting attributed to the Song dynasty, two ladies sit on stools playing double sixes. Although the artist's rendering of the game table (fig. 2) is slightly misconstrued, it is possible to see that it is actually constructed from two low platform tables set on top of one another, showing an early approach to elevating the table to the new seat height. A further development may be seen in a small table at the Shōsōin, which has its origins in the platform style (fig. 3). Here the platform's corner supports have been extended through its lower frame to raise the table off the ground. A later table with cabriole legs of Southern Song design (fig. 4), dated to circa A.D. 1200 according to Gustav Ecke ("Further Notes on Chinese Furniture"), is similar in construction yet larger in size.

A small *zitan* gaming table (fig. 6), also in the Shōsōin, is again based on the platform style. The top, however, has an expanded waist section to accommodate drawers that are concealed within the paneled design on the sides. A similar type of elevation occurs in a platform daybed seen in a detail from the eleventh-century Song painting entitled "Southern Tang Emperor Playing Weiqi" (fig. 7), which has a series of recessed carved panels inserted between its plain top frame and its vertical *kunmen* outlined supports. Although this decorative addition appears somewhat clumsy, it is another early indication of the marriage of the waist with the platform.

An excavated silver Buddhist pagoda from the Song dynasty (fig. 10) rests on its *zumizuo* pedestal with flora like feet burgeoning from under its foliated apron. It is not difficult to visualize an extension of these feet into the fully developed legs typical of high waisted furniture. This example clearly demonstrates an early stage in the organic transition from

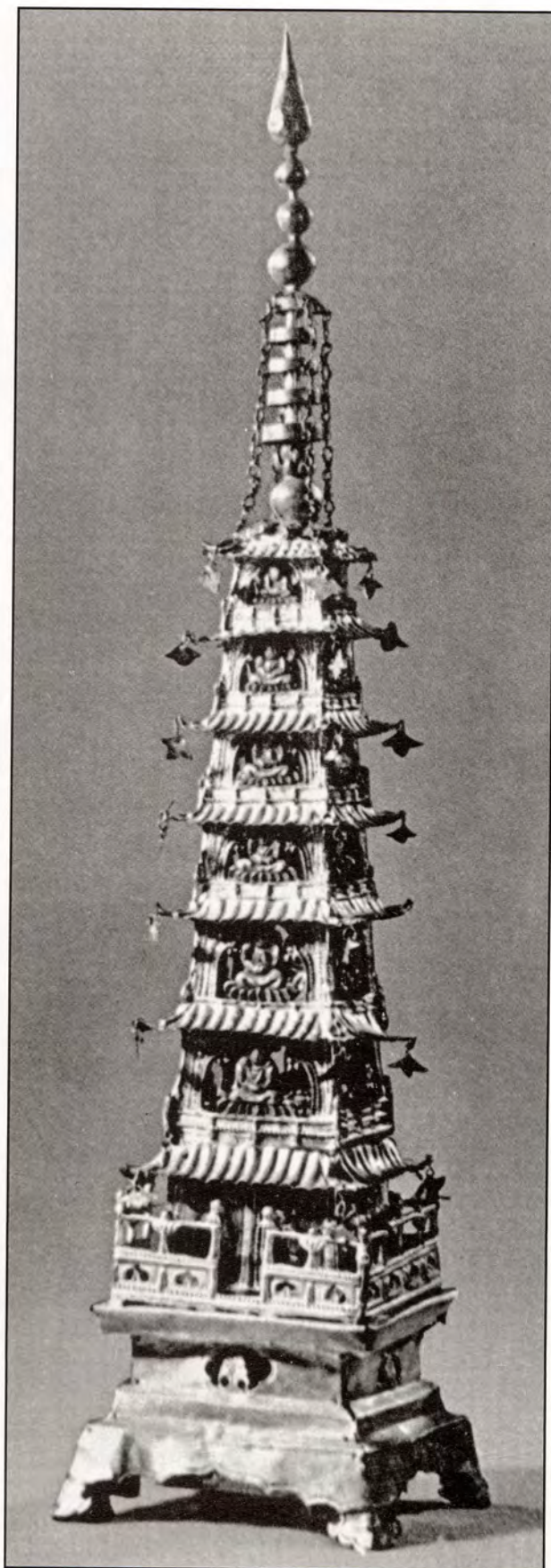
low platform furniture to high furniture. A similar yet slightly more archaic *zumizuo* pedestal, depicted in a somewhat deteriorated Jin dynasty (1115-1234) tomb scene, appears to retain its religious significance, as it supports an arrangement of lotus blossoms, flowers, and leaves—a symbol of the Buddha (fig. 5). In the frontispiece to the Lotus Sutra (*Miaofa lianhua jing*) dated circa A.D. 1200 (fig. 13), a woodblock print depicts a Buddhist deity sitting on what initially looks like a richly ornamented pedestal with lotus petals, curling tendrils, and geometric scrolling motifs. A closer inspection, however, reveals a more evolved open form, with cabriole legs encircling a lotus blossom. Similarly, the altar table in front of the figure has fully developed cabriole legs that recede behind the waisted frame. This entire grouping sits upon the balustraded architectural *zumizuo* platform.

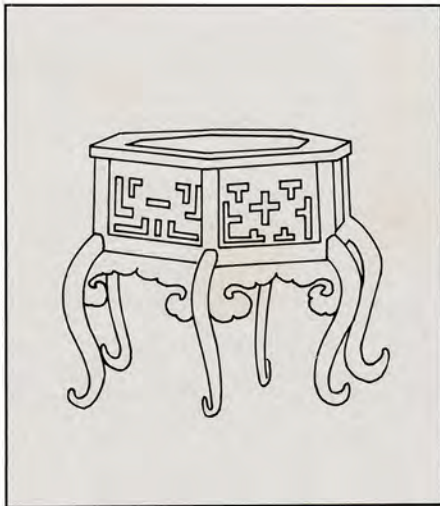
Among the objects excavated from the tomb of Yan Teyuan (1189) is a group of miniature wood furniture. Of nine pieces, only one, a cabriole-leg incense stand (fig. 11), has waisted construction. It is of the high waisted form with openwork panels, each carved with two *wanzi* characters inset between the exposed upper part of the legs. The other eight pieces are modeled after chairs, stools, and tables with recessed leg construction. By the thirteenth century raised seating had become fairly common, as evidenced by numerous depictions of raised furniture for everyday use. In a tomb scene dated 1210-12 at Houma in Shanxi province, a deceased couple sits on ornately carved waisted stools at a cabriole-leg waisted table (fig. 8) with a lush flower arrangement, also probably rich in symbolism. The table has ornate stretchers and spandrels to help support the sharply curved leg.

By the fourteenth century the waisted style of Ming dynasty furniture was almost fully developed, as can be seen in another group of excavated objects from the tomb of Zhu Tan (1389). Miniature wooden furniture models include a waisted *chuang* and a square, waisted incense stand with a ground stretcher (fig. 12). A waisted cabriole-leg altar table with a gallery railing (fig. 14) is illustrated in a

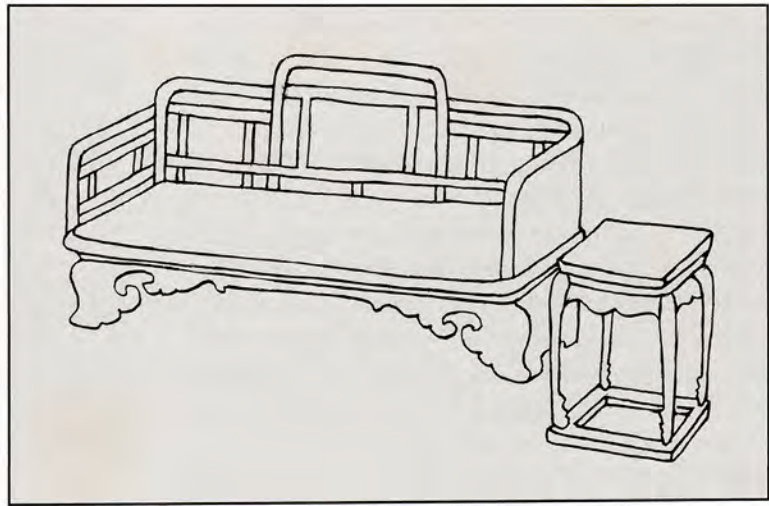
Fig. 9, facing page. Sakyamuni Buddha, Northern Wei period A.D. 477). Gilt-bronze, height 40.3 cm. Nitta Group Collection of Buddhist Art, Tokyo, Japan

Fig. 10. Silver Buddhist pagoda, Song dynasty (960-1280 excavated at Rayan Chekiang

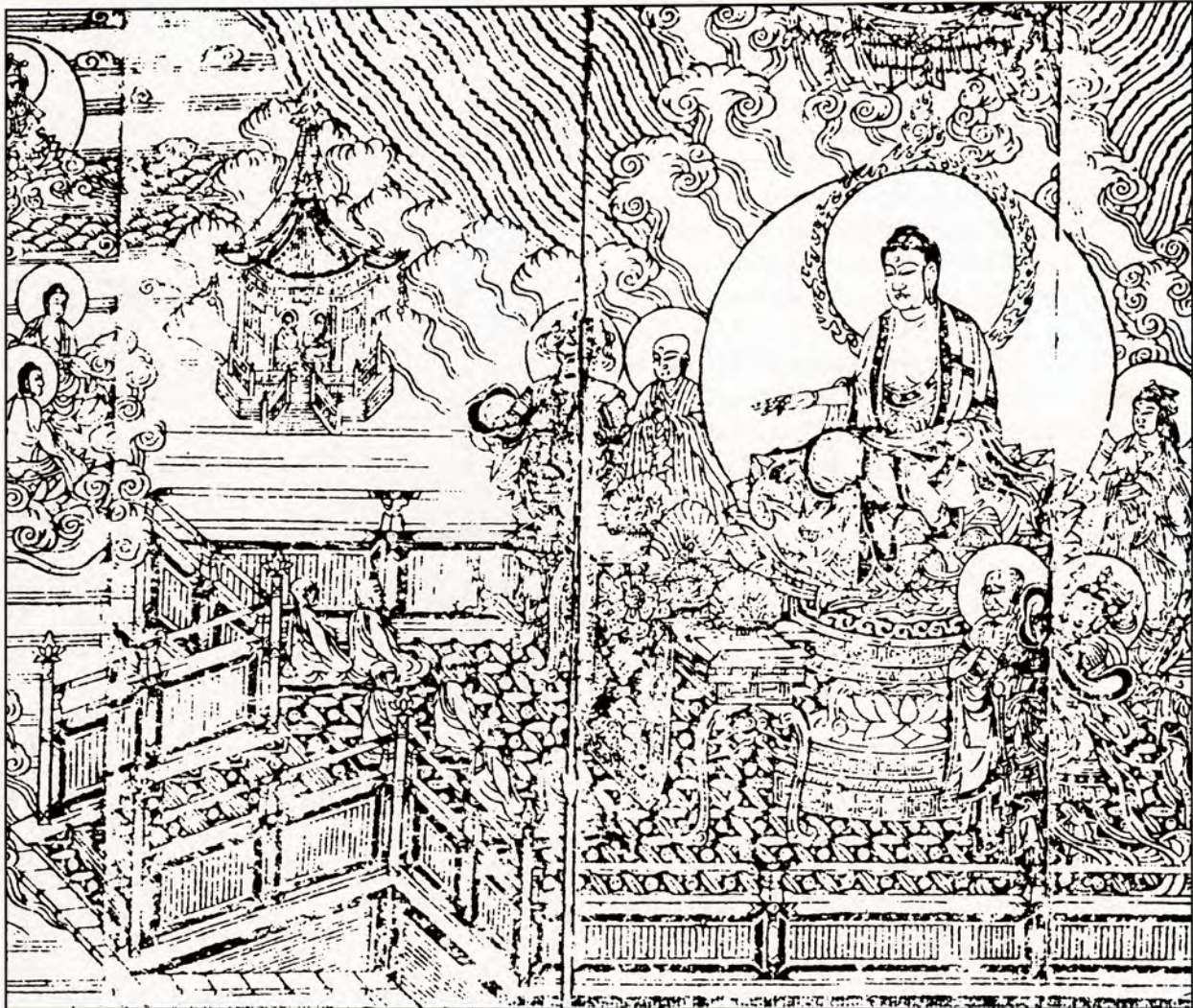




woodblock print from "Principles of Correct Diet" (*Yanshan Zhengyao*), dated 1330. Although the curvilinear legs and aprons are deeply carved, the waist



above is plain and continuous. The gallery around the table top simulates the balustrade often placed around the perimeter of the architectural *zumizuo*.



The incorporation of the waist in more common furnishings during this later period is further evidenced in a fifteenth to sixteenth-century copy of Liu Guandao's "Whiling Away the Summer." In it the artist did not restrain his more contemporary viewpoint, and added carved recessed panels to the top frames of both a square table and a platform bed (fig. 15), whereas the same pieces in the original late thirteenth-century painting were without these recesses (fig. 16)

These early developments may help to explain some of the joinery variations found in waisted furniture from the Ming dynasty onwards. One group of waisted furniture may be more closely related in its construction to its predecessor, the Tang-style platform form. In this group the frame, waist, and apron are all shaped from the same piece of wood. This type of construction is seen on the *jichimu* platform in the

collection of the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture. The upper frame is joined with blind double tenons and a half lapped miter (fig. 17). The frame is then locked into one integral unit with transverse cross braces (not shown) that slide-lock tenon into dovetail mortises. These braces are inset and provide

Fig 11 facing page, above, left. Drawing of cabriole-leg incense stand miniature tomb model from the Tomb of Yan Teyuan in Huayenssu Tatong Shanxi 1189. After Addis, pl 19c.

Fig 12, facing page, above, right. Drawing of chuang and incense stand wooden furniture models from the tomb of Zhu Tan Ming dynasty 1389 Shantung Provincial Museum, Jinan After Addis, fig 32j

Fig 13 facing page below Woodblock print frontispiece, Lotus Sutra (Miaofa jianhua jing), Southern Song dynasty c. 1200). From Zheng

Fig 14, below "Principles of Correct Diet," 1330. Woodblock print from Yanshan Zhengyao From Zheng



support for the four *nanmu* seat panels. The vertical corner support then meets the frame with half lapped miters and a single tenon.

Another group is composed of high waisted furniture in which the upper part of the leg is exposed, as in the elevated platform table from the Shōsōin (fig. 3) and the Song table (fig. 4), forming corner plinths similar to the carved vertical stone elements seen in architectural pedestals and foundations. This variation often appears on *kang* tables and side tables. Sometimes the additional space is efficiently utilized with drawers, as in the *huanghuali* high waisted table with two drawers in the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture (fig. 18). There is almost always an additional molding between the waist and the apron into which the recessed panels of the waist are tongue and grooved. The additional molding usually appears when recessed panels are used and occasionally when the waist is plain and continuous. This molding corresponds to the *cyma-reversa* molding in the *zumizuo* (fig. 1), as elaborated by Wang Shixiang (I.102-4)

In a third group with possible early origins, the entire leg recedes behind a foliated apron rather than joining with the more common bridle joint. This variation seems closely associated with the burgeon

ing growth that is seen on the budding feet of the silver Buddhist pagoda platform (fig. 10). In a high waisted *huanghuali* incense stand (fig. 21) at the Palace Museum in Beijing, the cabriole legs are fully developed. This form, although more rare in hardwood, is often seen in lacquered stands. The traces of this convention are retained in the more common form of mitered bridle joint construction when the beaded edge of the apron continues its foliated line across the leg, as it does in a late Ming *huanghuali* incense stand in the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture (fig. 22)

In the unornamented style of waisted furniture that at first so attracted Westerners, the lines of the waist were streamlined, leveling and synthesizing the plinths, cartouches, and carved ornamentation into one continuous band brought forward and flush with the upper part of the leg. This simplification was doubly advantageous, as it enabled the craftsmen to make the apron from one piece of wood, providing greater structural support. Lapping the waist over the leg to achieve an uninterrupted recessed band of wood grain was the next logical development, especially as hardwood furniture became more and more popular. As the sources of precious hardwoods were depleted, craftsmen began to economize by using



separate pieces of wood for the waist and apron.

Another variation may be found in a boldly executed *huanghuali* brazier stand in the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture. Here the mitred join where the leg meets the apron cuts through the continuous line of the recessed waist. On first impression, this joinery technique seems incongruous with the continuous band of the recessed waist. A group of furniture does exist with this join, however, mostly larger pieces such as *chuangs* and canopy beds (Ellsworth 140, 142, Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture* pls. 18, 21, 58; Wang II, pl. A49) Perhaps this technique was utilized more often in lacquered furniture workshops, because the uniform coating would have covered the flush surfaces where the joins meet. A study of the joinery of waisted lacquered furniture may someday clarify this speculation. On this brazier stand, it is also interesting to note how the cabinet maker intentionally stepped the ground of the cloudhead openwork design forward to avoid undercutting and weakening the mortise in the leg (fig. 19) Although this corner-leg join does not incorporate the dovetail wedge to lock the leg and apron together, crossed stretchers provide the necessary reinforcement to give this robust brazier its structural rigidity. The use of crossed stretchers on waisted stools and

stands might be seen as another stage in the development of the corner-leg join with tapered dovetail wedge (Evarts 11-13). This sophisticated join allowed the stretchers, both ground and intermediate, to be eliminated, making it more possible to sit in a chair at a waisted table.

A further variation appears in *kang* tables with animal masks carved on the shoulder of the leg. On a *zitan kang* table (fig. 20) at the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, the apron is butt joined to the cabriole leg. The apron and waist are shaped from one piece of wood, which is tenoned into the leg, with the waist section lapped over the upper part of the leg and mitred at the corner. The butt join is utilized here to avoid interfering with the design of the lion's mask. If a miter were used, the change in grain direction would detract from the overall design. A miter cut through high relief carving is also more subject to chipping and splintering. These practical consider-

Fig. 15, facing page. Fifteenth/sixteenth-century copy of Liu Guandao, "Whiling Away the Summer." Handscroll color on silk, 51.7 x 34.1 cm. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

Fig. 16 below Lu Guandao "Whiling Away the Summer." Yuan dynasty 1279-1368. Handscroll ink and color on silk, 30.5 x 71.1 cm. Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Nelson Fund, 48-5.



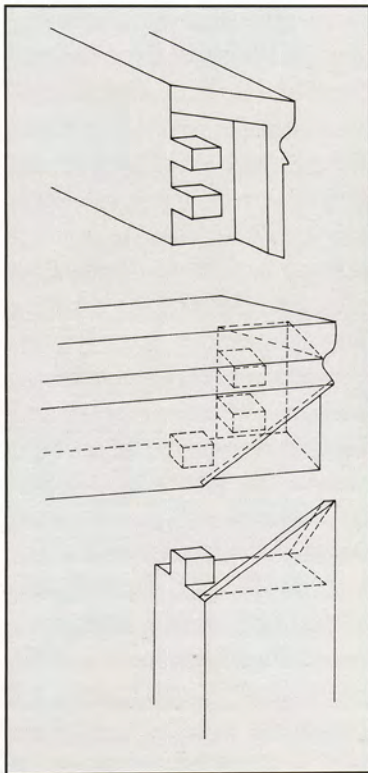
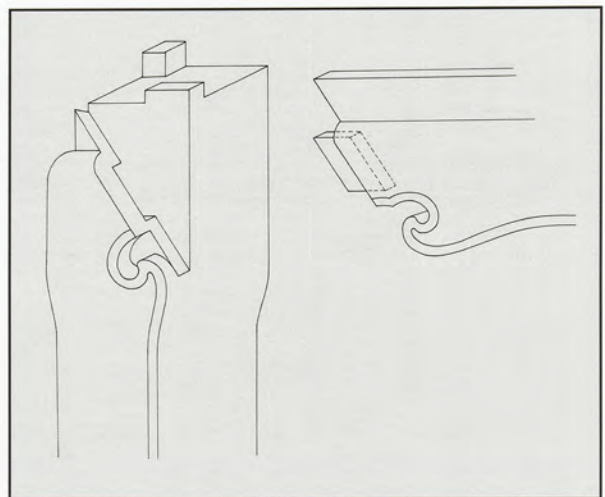


Fig 17 above left. Drawing of detail of platform-type daybed Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture Renaissance, California.

Fig 18, above right. Detail of waisted two-drawer table, late Ming dynasty Huanghual length 102 cm, height 85.5 cm, depth 47 cm. Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, Renaissance, California.

Fig 19, below Drawing join on brazier stand Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, Renaissance, California.

Fig 20, left. Detail of kang table, late Ming dynasty Zitan length 97.5 cm, height 29.5 cm, depth 66 cm. Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, Renaissance, California.



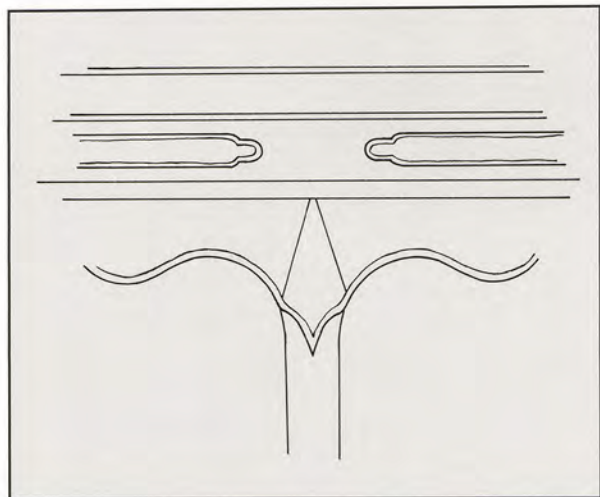
ations were undoubtedly the results of centuries of time-tested experimentation.

One must be extremely careful in using these arguably logical developments of form, and the variations of joinery found within them, as a means of dating. The deep-rooted Chinese veneration of the past is illustrated in the continuation of seemingly early furniture styles throughout the Qing dynasty. Form alone cannot be a determinant. The ornamentation, type of joinery, proportions and harmony of form, quality of materials and finally, patination and condition all must be weighed together to formulate realistic judgments. Nevertheless, increasing our understanding of these areas will help us to differentiate earlier pieces from later ones.

We may conclude that most of the earlier examples of waisted furniture were variations of incense stands and altar tables that still retained religious implications as platforms for Buddhist rites, like the early *zumizuo*. The religious significance of the waisted form had diminished by the early part of the Ming dynasty, and waisted furniture became incorporated into everyday use. Synthesized over centuries from the *zumizuo*, the box platform, and the gradual change in seat height, the minimalistic lines of the waisted form had reached perfection by the middle of the Ming dynasty.

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Fig 21 above. Incense stand Ming dynasty 1368-1644). Huanghual height 73 cm, diameter of top 50.5 cm. The Palace Museum, Beijing

Fig 22, left. Drawing of beading across leg Incense stand Museum of Cass ca Chinese Furniture Renaissance, California.