

Orientations

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For many connoisseurs and collectors classical Chinese furniture exemplifies a bygone era – the leisurely artistic pursuits of the literati or a life of grandeur conducted behind the high walls of a palace compound. With its elegant lines and superb craftsmanship, however, furniture from the Ming and early Qing periods also conforms to the highest principles of modern design. In the last fifty years, its beauty, strength and durability have begun to appeal to a wider audience, an audience unfortunately often confused by the scarcity of information relating to this area of Chinese art. This issue of *Orientations* brings together a collection of papers delivered in Hong Kong at the Dr S.Y. Yip Symposium on Classic Chinese Furniture with the intention of making the latest literary and scientific research in the field more immediately accessible. From an analysis of the way furniture was perceived by seventeenth century book illustrators to a look at some of the ways in which the unwary purchaser might be deceived by clever reconstructions or forgeries, these articles will be of interest to the specialist and non specialist alike. Hopefully they will also stimulate further interest in these magnificent pieces, which according to Wang Shixiang 'shine so brightly long after the sun has set'.

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Drunken lord's chair
Huanghuali
Height 101.3 cm, width 72 cm,
depth 91.5 cm
Museum of Classical Chinese
Furniture, Renaissance, California

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Recent Acquisitions and Projects of the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture

Curtis Evarts



(Fig. 1) Folding table with drawer
Ming dynasty (1368-1644)
Huanghuali with marble panel
Height 86.5 cm, width 91.5 cm, depth 57.1 cm
Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, Renaissance, California



(Fig. 2) Bookcase with drawers and lattice panels
Ming dynasty (1368-1644)
Huanghuali and *wumu*
Height 196 cm, width 108 cm, depth 21 cm
Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, Renaissance, California

Chinese furniture from the Ming and early Qing dynasties now lies somewhere between an endangered and an extinct species. Wang Shixiang said recently, 'For every thousand pieces created, only one has survived'. While there are a few collections of Chinese furniture in American museums, and private collections are scattered throughout the world, the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture in Renaissance, California is the first museum either inside or outside China devoted to the preservation and appreciation of Chinese hardwood furniture from this period (see Sarah Handler's articles in *Orientations*, January 1991, pp. 42-57).

As with China's wooden architecture, furniture was subject to fire, floods and damage from earthquakes, not to mention the tumultuous political events of China's recent history. Finding original, unaltered pieces is today extremely difficult. Scholarship in this discipline has not been developed to the same degree as in other fields, for in Western terms Chinese furniture has

always been thought 'highly problematic', and in China furniture-making was never considered a serious art form – anonymous craftsmen simply produced seats, tables and cabinets. As Craig Clunas has noted, the modern Chinese term for furniture, *jiaju*, was more often used in reference to agricultural implements during the Ming (1368-1644) and early Qing (1644-1911) dynasties (*Chinese Furniture*, 1988, p. 102). Throughout history, however, inspired individuals have imbued these inanimate objects with their creative spirit and produced masterpieces. Although during the golden age of furniture-making in China (1368-1722) the general level of craftsmanship and design reached standards that appealed to the aesthetic sense of the court as well as the literati, a utilitarian attitude towards furniture remained – reflected in the generally poor level of restoration and conservation found in antique Chinese furniture today. Now that the supply no longer meets the demand, there is the additional problem of forgeries.



(Fig. 3) Miniature yoke-back chair
Ming dynasty (1368-1644)
Unglazed pottery
Height 21 cm,
width 10.5 cm,
depth 8.5 cm
Museum of Classical
Chinese Furniture,
Renaissance, California

(Fig. 5) Table with
horsehoof feet and giant's
arm braces
Ming dynasty (1368-1644)
Huanghuali
Height 85 cm,
width 94.5 cm,
depth 94.5 cm
Museum of Classical
Chinese Furniture,
Renaissance, California



(Fig. 4) Miniature waisted table with horsehoof feet
Ming dynasty (1368-1644)
Unglazed pottery
Height 15.3 cm, width 19.9 cm, depth 19.9 cm
Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, Renaissance, California



(Fig. 6) Miniature throne
Ming dynasty (1368-1644)
Glazed pottery
Height 8.4 cm, width 10.5 cm, depth 6.9 cm
Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, Renaissance, California

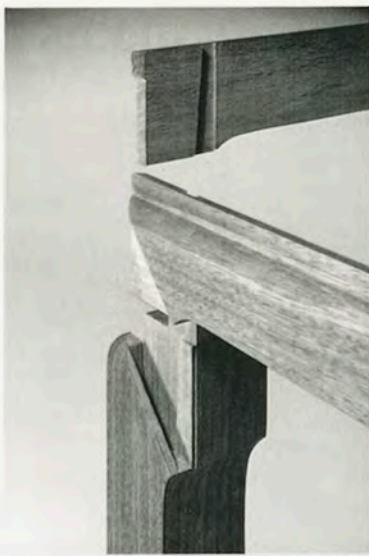


Two recent acquisitions to the more than one hundred pieces of Ming and Qing hardwood furniture in the museum's collection are a *huanghuali* folding table (Fig. 1) and a large *huanghuali* and *wumu* bookcase (Fig. 2). The table has several unique characteristics including a green marble panel supported with transverse braces every six inches, original *baitong* (white brass)-capped feet, fluted legs, strong beading and a drawer. The bookcase is unusually large and also has *baitong*-capped feet. The drawers and lattice panels are made from *wumu*, an extremely hard, brittle, close-grained wood resembling ebony.

The museum is also forming a collection of excavated miniature tomb furniture as supplementary study material. Because the furniture is generally crudely modelled with coil and slab techniques, chairs are often constructed more like stools or folding stools with backs and armrests added above. Some pieces are modelled more intentionally, however, as with the yoke-back armchair in Figure 3. The full aprons with beading

and a strongly drawn *kummen*-shaped opening reflect details and design elements from the Ming dynasty. On other pieces the wood grain is clearly depicted with incised lines, making a direct reference to the material it was intended to represent. Thermoluminescence testing can now date the last firing of pottery to within a ten year period. A recent sampling of the museum's models gave results from the early fourteenth to the sixteenth century. The examples tested included a square, unglazed pottery table dated to the late fourteenth century (Fig. 4). Its form can be compared to a square *huanghuali* table also in the collection (Fig. 5). Other pieces, such as the small throne in Figure 6, capture the animated spirit found in lifesize hardwood furniture.

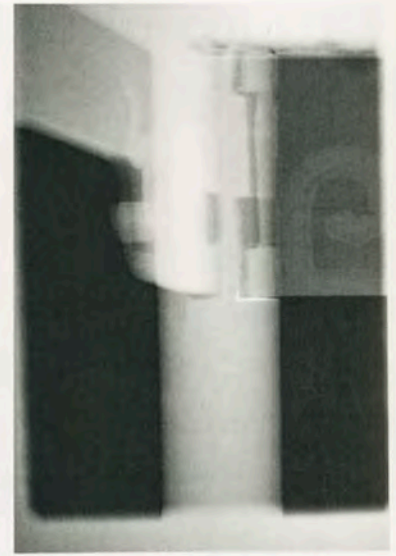
One essential aspect of the appreciation of Chinese hardwood furniture is an understanding of its joinery and craftsmen in the museum's workshop have produced an extensive study collection of joinery models. Whenever new joins are en-



(Figs 7a and b) Joinery model of a corner-leg joint



(Fig. 8b) Detail of meditation platform
Ming dynasty (1368-1644)
Huanghuali
Size of platform: height 50.8 cm,
width 113 cm, depth 86.4 cm
Museum of Classical Chinese
Furniture, Renaissance, California



(Fig. 8a) X-ray of a meditation platform



(Fig. 9) X-ray of a corner-leg joint on a waisted table



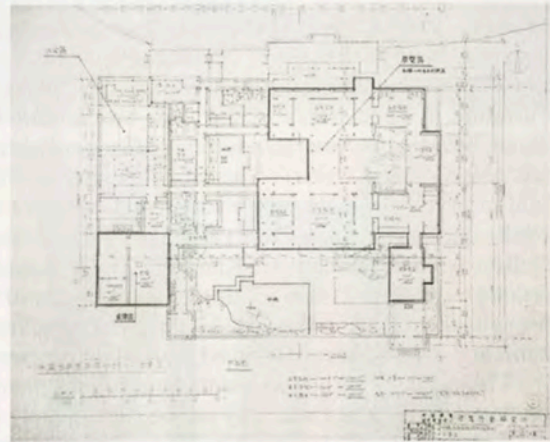
(Fig. 10) Detail of woodblock illustration from a sixteenth century edition of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo yanyi*) (After *Zhongguo meishu quanji* [*The Fine Arts of China*], vol. 20, Shanghai, 1988, p. 129)

countered, full scale replicas are produced (Figs 7a and b). Although drawings have been made of many of the joints used in traditional furniture, no serious study of joinery linking it to the terminology used in architectural and other related technologies has yet been attempted. When it is not practical to disassemble furniture, the use of X-ray photography can dispel some of the myths. The X-ray in Figure 8a is taken from the meditation platform in the museum's collection (Fig. 8b). It shows the sophisticated slide-lock dovetail tenons which fasten the aprons to the leg. Relatively unsophisticated joinery is illustrated in Figure 9, which shows a corner leg joint on a waisted table with giant's arm braces. Reused material is also revealed in the table top frame, previously drilled for a soft seat.

The museum also has a research library devoted to Chinese furniture. In addition to obscure articles from old publications, many of them in foreign languages and translated into English, it currently holds many rare books, museum bulletins, periodicals and a wealth of visual references, including more than forty volumes of catalogued furniture illustrations that are regularly updated. The library also has a large collection of woodblock print publications and is developing a photo reference section containing many Chinese paintings that depict furniture in use.



(Fig. 11) Table with cabriole legs
Ming dynasty (1368-1644)
Huanghuali
Height 91 cm, length 175 cm,
depth 59 cm
Museum of Classical Chinese
Furniture, Renaissance,
California



(Figs 12a and b) Proposed
design for the new Museum of
Classical Chinese Furniture

Much has been said about the fanciful illustrations in woodblock prints and paintings, yet accurate renderings of unusual pieces suggest that they are indeed an important source of information. A sixteenth century woodblock print from a popular edition of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo yanyi*) (Fig. 10) depicts a waisted side table with cabriole legs similar to a *huanghuali* side table in the collection (Fig. 11). A study of this form alone and its influence on seventeenth and eighteenth century European furniture awaits serious scholarship. Woodblock prints and paintings are also excellent references for studying the uses of furniture.

In 1990, the founders of the museum established an international society for Chinese furniture enthusiasts to create a forum for the development of scholarship and research in this emerging field through regular publications and lectures. The *Journal of the Classical Chinese Furniture Society*, currently the main focus, includes a broad range of articles on the latest research as well as obscure, yet important, scholarship from the past.

Unfortunately, the neoclassical environment of the building where the Chinese furniture collection is currently displayed is incongruous with the minimalistic lines of Ming furniture and has only enough floor space to display half the collection. Fu Xinian, a senior architect at the Institute of Architectural His-

tory in Beijing, is currently designing a new museum complex in traditional Chinese architectural style (Figs 12a and b). Adapted for museum use and the climate of Renaissance, it will include galleries and display rooms interspersed with courtyards, pavilions and traditional Chinese gardens.

In the postscript of *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, Wang Shixiang expressed his hope that his work would be 'the cast brick that attracts jade' – a reference to the immense amount of work and research remaining to be done in the field of Chinese furniture. With the emergence of a museum devoted entirely to classical Chinese furniture, of which the primary objective is to represent only the highest quality pieces, his hope may be fulfilled.

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Photographs by James Kline and Frederick Choisel.

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