

Orientations

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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New Directions in Chinese Furniture Connoisseurship: Early Traditional Furniture

Curtis Evarts

Within the various realms of art appreciation and collection, trends and fashions rise and fall with new areas of discovery, new knowledge and, not least, availability of material. In the field of Chinese furniture, conditions during the late 1980s and early '90s provided an exciting decade or so for dealers, collectors and scholars of classically styled *huanghuali* furniture. In recent years however, the market has changed, with a dearth of interesting objects which, when found, command high prices. Consequently, a problem with hard-to-detect fakes has developed. This situation has resulted in a shift of attention away from the more broadly associated material culture towards various other aspects of the subject. Academically, there is increasing interest in the domestic environment and its architecture, and many collectors and dealer-collectors are now venturing further into the vast ocean of traditional Chinese furniture.

Biases surrounding the relative value of 'non-hardwood' traditional furniture are also diminishing as conventional wisdom gives way to new knowledge. Previously, the extravagant prestige that tropical materials like *zitan* and *huanghuali* possessed eclipsed the fact that elegantly styled furniture was also created in other materials. Now collectors are also enjoying fine furniture crafted from woods like *nanmu*, cypress, walnut, mulberry and oak as well as a host of others.

Lacquered furniture, too, once proclaimed by devout hardwood enthusiasts as belonging to a separate artisan tradition, is receiving renewed attention. While few will deny that decorative lacquer required considerably more labour as well as specialized techniques in its finishing stages, the shared fundamental woodworking techniques used to produce lacquered and hardwood furniture are self-evident. In addition, mounting evidence supporting the premise that transparent lacquer was a traditional finish of hardwood furniture (often balanced with undercoatings of thickened raw lacquer applied to the unexposed surfaces) suggests 'shared' rather than 'distinct' traditions.

Amongst Chinese furniture aficionados, there is a growing awareness that not all the so-called 'vernacular' or 'softwood' furniture can be so easily dismissed as 'provincial', 'country' or 'peasant' furniture. Although not of common stock, there are examples to be found that reflect similar qualities of artistic style and refined craftsmanship to those produced from tropical hardwoods, differing only in their use of alternative materials. There are some that once boasted exquisite lacquer coatings, many of which have unfortunately decayed beyond recognition; ironically, it was these objects that held pride of place in their day, far exceeding contemporary appraisals of plain hardwood furniture. There is a more rarefied group yet that has survived to reflect 'early traditional' styles – those that predate the so-called late Ming (1368-1644) and early Qing (1644-1911) period 'classical style'. While a broader range of traditional Chinese furniture is now receiving unprecedented attention, it is towards furniture of early traditional style that the core of this article is devoted.

Along with regional tendencies, relatively unified furniture

styles have coexisted throughout China since at least the Tang dynasty (618-906). Similar chair designs from the Tang period are found in wall paintings at Dunhuang, Gansu province in northwestern China, and in the frequently cited chair stored in the Shōsō-in (at the Tōdai-ji) in Nara, Japan. In part, this phenomenon was supported by the dissemination of traditions and standards through publications and centralized labour pools. The *Yingzao Fashi* (*Treatise on Architectural Methods*) (dated 1069), *Ziren Yizhi* (*Traditions of the Joiner's Craft*) (dated 1264) and the fifteenth century carpenter's manual *Lu Ban Jing* (*Classic of Lu Ban*) were publications related to the woodworker's world that transmitted traditional knowledge. Perhaps even more influential was the effect of *corvée* or labour service, in lieu of monetary tax, which was practised during the Tang, Yuan (1279-1368) and Ming dynasties. During the early Ming period, craftsmen from throughout the empire travelled to the capital for three months of duty every three years, where work was performed according to regulations and standards, and where natural exchange of techniques and ideas was inevitable. Publications and *corvée* service both helped to advance the transmission and development of styles and standard woodworking techniques not only throughout China, but also to adjacent foreign kingdoms.

Early traditional furniture exhibits pronounced stylistic characteristics associated with the Tang, Song (960-1279), Yuan and early Ming dynasties. While this sweeping term will likely seem grossly insufficient in the future, it is used here given the present state of knowledge and limited body of known objects. Despite the apparent unity of style, variations due to regional tendencies and differences in local materials are becoming increasingly evident as objects with provenance come to light, some details of which will be elaborated upon below.

It was previously believed that little if any pre-sixteenth century furniture had survived. However, examples that appear to be solidly dated to the Ming period, and in some cases, even earlier, were discovered in the course of explorations into the more isolated regions of China in search of classical hardwood furniture. Shanxi province, situated in north-central China, has a cultural legacy that extends deep into China's past. The region has also assimilated significant cultural influences from the northern Khitan, Jürchen and Mongolian peoples of the corresponding Liao (907-1125), Jin (1115-1234) and Yuan dynasties, who occupied its territory for over four centuries. Today, Shanxi province is a sanctuary of national heritage, with over 75 per cent of China's pre-Yuan period timber architecture. The relatively dry climate has favoured the preservation of wood objects, such as sculpture and furniture, and the region's relative isolation from the social turmoil and warfare of recent centuries has left untouched cultural treasures that were elsewhere destroyed. In retrospect, it should not be surprising that some early furniture from this region has also survived.

The yoke-back armchair (one of a pair) illustrated in Figure 1 was discovered in this region. Its early traditional style – distinguished by its low overall height in proportion to the broad seat, by the strong line of its yoke-shaped crestrail and



(Fig. 1) One of a pair of yoke-back armchairs
Shanxi province, 15th/16th century
Chinese locust (*huaimu*)
Height 103 cm, width 61 cm, depth 45.5 cm
C.L. Ma Collection, Beijing

by the arched-back line of its backrest – can be compared to chairs depicted in Tang period wall paintings at Dunhuang (see Sarah Handler, 'A Yokeback Chair for Sitting Tall', in *Journal of the Classical Chinese Furniture Society*, Spring 1993, p. 5) as well as to those illustrated in The Metropolitan Museum of Art's handscroll *Elegant Gathering in the Apricot Garden* by Xie Huan (c. 1368–1455). The material used in this example, Chinese locust (*huaimu*), was also common to many early pieces from north-central China. While easily confused with northern elm (*yumu*), upon visual inspection locust is somewhat coarser in texture and exhibits considerably higher strength and density, as well as having high resistance to damage from water and boring insects. The central frame of the tri-sectional backrest was drilled for a panel of finely woven cane, and a protective iron plate wrapped about the footrest is secured with boss-head nails.

Both chairs retain remnants of crackled black-lacquer coatings, which were applied over finely woven fabric – a technique that was widely practised throughout the Song, Yuan and Ming periods and into the early Qing period. The fabric, having been pasted to the substrate, served as an intermediary bond, allowing the initial layer of lacquer paste to be smoothed over with ease. Shanxi province is renowned for its ancient lacquer traditions, which have continued into modern times. Decorated lacquer furniture has been produced in Pingyao since the Tang dynasty (Liu Jixian, Kong Fanzhu and Wan Liangshi, *Shanxi Mingchan*, Taiyuan, 1991, p. 90), and Jishan in southwestern Shanxi has been a production centre for mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquerware since the Song dynasty (Song Jinlong, ed., *Shanxi Feng Wu Zhi*, Taiyuan, 1992, p. 349). Red lacquer was used to accentuate the raised beading around the decorative openings in the backrest and aprons as well as the decorative side posts of these chairs. The latter are shaped as a stalk of bamboo in a vase, which forms the symbolic rebus 'zhubao ping'an', a reminder of the benefit



(Fig. 2) *Qin* table
Shanxi province, 16th/17th century
Chinese locust (*huaimu*) and *wutong*
Height 86 cm, length
110 cm, depth 48.5 cm
C.L. Ma Collection, Beijing

in pursuing virtue, and a theme which runs throughout the Confucian philosophical system that produced governing officials.

The *qin* ('zither') table appears as an established category by the Song dynasty, when, in the *Dongtian Qinglu Ji* (*Records of the Pure Registers of the Cavern Heaven*), Zhao Xigu (1170-1242) documented its exemplary characteristics. The width was to approximate that of four *qin*, the length exceeding that of the *qin* by one third, and the height was to be 2 *chi* 8 *cun* (about 87 cm) in order that the knees of the player might fit comfortably under the table. Legs of sturdy construction were further prescribed, and those with stone panels were ranked first followed by those of solid thick timber. Accordingly, the tone of the *qin* was improved by the table's otherwise superfluous size, as well as by a resonant, hard-lacquer finish upon a thickly coated base (*huiqi*).

The table illustrated in Figure 2 may well be considered a *qin* table according to the proportions noted above. Also with a provenance from the Shanxi region, its sturdy framework is constructed of Chinese locust; however, lightweight *wutong* was selected for the central panel, the surface of which was originally coated with thick lacquer. *Wutong*, with natural resonant qualities, has long been used for the sounding boards of musical instruments, and its employment here may have been related to tone enhancement. The flush-sided (*simianping*) construction clearly exhibits a Ming style that can be seen in paintings and woodcuts of the period, but few Ming-style hardwood examples ever achieve such a successful combination of vigorous stance and elegant line.

Concern for tone production and relaxed ease while playing the *qin* resulted in ongoing experimentation and development

of the *qin* table during the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. In *Ge Gu Yao Lun* (*The Essential Criteria of Antiquities*), published in 1388, Cao Zhao noted that the best *qin* tables were made with Guogong tomb bricks. Wang Zou's commentaries further described this brick as hollow, grey, 150 centimetres long and over 30 centimetres wide, patterned with 'elephant-eye' motifs, and reputedly from ancient tombs surrounding Zhengzhou in Henan province; he further alluded to its quality of resonance that 'produced a pure and delightful tone' (Sir Percival David, tr. and ed., with Basil Gray, *Chinese Connoisseurship, the Ko Ku Yao Lun [The Essential Criteria of Antiquities]*, London, 1971, pp. 106 and 322:23b). Over two hundred years later, the similar, repeated comments of Gao Lian (*Zunsheng Bajian, [Eight Discourses on the Art of Living]*, c. 1591, reprinted in *Wenyuange Siku Quanshu*, vol. 871, Taipei), Tu Long (*Qin Qian [Notes on the Qin]*, published 1606, reprinted in *Meishu Congshu*, 1:6, Shenzhen, 1947, vol. 3, pp. 124-25) and Wen Zhenheng (*Zhangwu zhi Jiaozhu [Treatise on Superfluous Things]*, c. 1618, reprinted Nanjing, 1984, *juan* 7 [*Qintai*], p. 298) suggest that the hollow brick *qin* tables were still in fashion during the late Ming period. Late Ming and Qing period *huanghuali qin* tables constructed with sound chambers and/or internal coiled springs for increased resonance have also been published (Wang Shixiang, *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, Hong Kong, 1990, pl. B.132P; Grace Wu Bruce, *The Dr S.Y. Yip Collection of Classic Chinese Furniture*, Hong Kong, 1991, pp. 64-65).

Although once perhaps more common, the unusual *qin* table illustrated in Figure 3 exemplifies a rare type of Chinese furniture with corresponding historical records as noted above. The surface of the hollow tomb brick bears a stamped decoration of 'elephant-eye' lozenge patterns; Wen Zhenheng found its hard,



(Fig. 3) *Qin* table
Shanxi province, 16th/17th century
Chinese locust (*huaimu*) and *wutong*
Stand: height 58 cm, length 112.5 cm, depth 43 cm; brick: height 13.5 cm
C.L. Ma Collection, Beijing

(Fig. 4) Table
Anhui province, 16th/17th century
Fir
Height 91.5 cm, length 102 cm, depth 51 cm
Private collection



(Fig. 5) Detail of *Elegant Gathering in the Apricot Garden* showing a painting table
By Xie Huan (c. 1368-1455), 1437
Handscroll, ink and colour on silk
Length 240.6 cm, width 36.6 cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, The Dillon Fund Gift, 1989.141.3

water-insensitive surface well suited for setting out potted landscapes when not in use as a *qin* platform (Wen, op. cit.). The stand is of a traditional recessed-leg style. The open frame is moulded with a thick, wide lip around its perimeter, which serves to retain the brick. The aprons are shaped with high beading against a flat ground, and the surfaces retain traces of black lacquer. It would be folly to classify these literati-associated *qin* tables, or the armchairs discussed above, as common vernacular or peasant furniture. Furthermore, such examples, constructed of local 'softwood' materials with lacquer finishes, lead to further questioning of arbitrary distinctions based upon substrate materials.

The high-waisted table illustrated in Figure 4 was discovered in the Anhui region. Anhui province, directly to the west of the southern coastal provinces of Jiangsu and Zhejiang, is renowned for its spectacular mountains and pastoral countryside, where many well-preserved estates dating to the Ming period can still be found. Southern Anhui also has a long association with the production of the 'Four Treasures of the Studio' (inkstones, ink sticks, brushes and paper), as well as fine lacquerware, carved bamboo and carved wood blocks. Both Anhui and Shanxi merchants were instrumental in setting up financial institutions and trade networks which flourished during the Ming and Qing periods. Returns were frequently invested in large family estates in honour of their ancestors and to preserve the family lineage.

The Anhui table was fashioned from a dense variety of fir and exhibits a robust 'early traditional' style. The form can be compared to one illustrated as a small painting table in a detail from the handscroll *Elegant Gathering in the Apricot Garden* (Fig. 5), which records an actual occasion in 1437 when high-ranking officials and friends gathered to enjoy food, wine, antiquities and composition. Notable



(Fig. 6) Table with drawer
Shanxi province, Ming period (1368-1644) or earlier
Northern elm (*yumu*) and red lacquer
Height 84 cm, width 81 cm, depth 71 cm
C.L. Ma Collection, Beijing



(Fig. 7) Incense stand
Shanxi province, 13th-15th century
Northern elm (*yumu*) and miscellaneous woods
Height 83.5 cm, width 58 cm, depth 51 cm
C.L. Ma Collection, Beijing

early characteristics include the profile of the moulded table top, the line of the *kunmen*-shaped openings drawn with indentations at the corners, and the style of the high, pointed feet with cloud-scroll flanges that define the top. The surfaces retain patches of the original black lacquer finish that was applied over a gauze-embedded undercoating. The lacquer putty undercoating on Anhui lacquer furniture is frequently more thinly applied than that of Shanxi furniture; however, its composition is often considerably more dense. It is likely that the original surface was also patterned with gold-lacquer (*miaojin*) decoration, a technique for which Anhui province was renowned.

Lacquer specialists have generally noted the greater number of black-lacquer objects in proportion to those of red lacquer, the latter being somewhat more exclusively related to imperial realms and temple furnishings. The red-lacquer table from Shanxi illustrated in Figure 6 may well have been placed in a temple, perhaps in front of a large altar table. The high-waisted architectural form exhibits a robust early traditional style, and one that is further enlivened by the high-arched humpback stretchers with foliate carving. Evidence of this latter technique appears in excavated wine tables from the early Ming period tomb of Zhu Tan (Wang, op. cit., pl. B39), and even earlier in furniture depicted in Jin and Yuan period wall paintings (Zhang Dexiang, 'Yuandai Jiaju de Fengge' in *Shoucangjia*, 1997:1, no. 33, p. 27) and brick carvings (Kaogu, 1961:12, pp. 681-83) from the Shanxi region. A drawer with a beaded panel fits neatly into the high waist, and the three surrounding panels are each pierced with long, beaded openings through which the lacquered sides of the drawer appear as recessed panels. Decorative *ruyi* or cloud-head flanges are shaped above the feet in a



(Fig. 8) Illustration to *Yanshan Zhengyao* (Principles of Correct Diet) showing an incense table
Yuan period (1279-1368)
Wood-block print

similar style to those of the table illustrated in Figure 2.

Juxtaposed with the robust style of the red-lacquer table are the refined grace and elegance exhibited by the rare incense stand illustrated in Figure 7. This stand, which was also discovered in the Shanxi region, retains a muted black-lacquer finish with traces of gold filigree decoration typical of the late Ming period; however, in a few areas where the lacquer has chipped away, evidence of an earlier red-lacquer finish is visible. A prominent 'drip edge' around the top neatly follows indentations at the four corners, and the edge combines indented corner, and concave and ogival profiles to achieve a refined yet complex moulding. *Taohuan* ornamental panels with long beaded openings decorate the high waist, and each is framed by corner posts extending vertically from the legs, as well as an acutely shaped 'sword-ridge' moulding that runs horizontally around the top of the aprons. The highly articulated profile of the aprons can be compared to those depicted in Jin dynasty brick carvings excavated in Shanxi (Yan Huijian, *Shanxi Gujianzhu Zhuangshi Tu'an*, Beijing, 1992, p. 16) and in Yuan dynasty wood-

block print illustrations (Fig. 8), while the style of the slender cabriole legs with upturned feet is comparable to a miniature stand excavated from a Jin dynasty tomb discovered at Datong in Shanxi (Lee Yu-kuan, *Oriental Lacquer Art*, New York, 1972, pp. 306-307); the delicate feet on this black-lacquer incense stand have survived intact largely due to the reinforcement of decorative iron wraps.

An early traditional style is clearly evident in the tapered cabinet illustrated in Figure 9. Over the past few years, the author has noticed a number of examples, all from the Suzhou region in Jiangsu province, that are similarly constructed, finished with black lacquer and painted with gold-outlined landscapes. The early style here is characterized by the multi-panelled construction, a common technique used before the more sophisticated development of transverse braces with dovetail keys that secure a single panel from the back. Such is the predominant construction pattern evident amongst paintings, woodcuts and actual examples from the Ming period. The earliest known illustration of a tapered cabinet appears in the



(Fig.9) Cabinet
Suzhou region, Jiangsu province, 16th century
Fir and lacquer
Height 218 cm, width 121 cm, depth 77 cm
Zhu Jiahua Collection, Taipei



(Fig. 10) Detail of *Spring Festival along the River*
By Qiu Ying (1494/5-1552)
Handscroll, ink and colour on silk
National Palace Museum, Taipei

children's picture/character book *Xinbian Duixiang* of 1436, in which each door frame is subdivided with a narrow *taohuan* panel in its mid-section. A similar cabinet is found in the furniture-making shop rendered by Qiu Ying (1494/5-1552) in a mid-Ming version of the Zhang Zeduan (act. early 12th century) painting *Spring Festival along the River* (Fig. 10); the scene, which does not appear in the original, suggests a contemporary sixteenth century representation (for a detail of the original, see the article by David Sensabaugh in this issue, fig. 6). Examples illustrated in the popular encyclopaedia *Sancai Tuhui* of 1607, with multi-panelled doors featuring decorative *taohuan* panels, also suggest the widespread adoption of this style during the Ming period. Actual examples of similar construction and finished with carved lacquer, which bear Longqing (1567-72) and Wanli (1573-1620) period inscriptions, have been published by Wang Shixiang (Wang, op. cit., pl. D28) and Michel Beurdeley (Katherine Watson tr., *Chinese*

Furniture, Tokyo and New York, 1979, pp. 102-103). In light of this evidence, the single panel doors evident in miniature tapered cabinets excavated near Shanghai from the tomb of Pan Yunzheng (d. 1589), which are often used as a dating benchmark, should perhaps be viewed as an emerging new style that gradually displaced the multi-panelled constructions during the seventeenth century (Wang Zhenghu, 'Conjectures on Models of Ming Period Furniture Excavated from the Pan Yunzheng Tomb in Shanghai', in Nancy Berliner, *Beyond the Screen: Chinese Furniture of the 16th and 17th Centuries*, Boston, 1996, p. 150, fig. 30c).

While the early round-leg tapered cabinets from the Suzhou region exhibit a pronounced amount of splay, those from the Shanxi region are frequently found with little to no splay. Another somewhat related style of multi-panelled cabinet from the Shanxi region with overhanging cap and short cabriole legs has recently come to light, and its form correlates with examples



(Fig. 11) Cabinet
Shanxi province, 14th/15th century
Pine
Height 166 cm, width 166 cm, depth 65 cm
C.L. Ma Collection, Beijing



(Fig. 12) Coffin
Shanxi province, 12th/13th century
Chinese locust (*huaimu*) and poplar (*yangmu*)
Height 90.5 cm, length 116 cm, width 65 cm
C.L. Ma Collection, Beijing

of Ming tomb pottery furniture from the same region. An early example of this type is illustrated in Figure 11. The frontally oriented cabinet stands on stout 'leopard legs' (*baojiao*) with lotus-shaped pads. The applied moulding, shaped as a continuous line of *ruyi* lappets around the frame, may also be compared with decorative detailing found on some early Tibetan and Indian furniture. The inner, surrounding border of *taohuan* panels is pierced, with figural and floral carvings in high relief, which are comparable to those found in Jin and Yuan dynasty brick carvings. Later cabinets of this style are frequently fitted with a row of drawers out of normal reach along the top.

The coffer illustrated in Figure 12 exhibits an early traditional style from the Shanxi region that is here attributed to the twelfth or thirteenth century. The decorative style of the Liao and Jin cultures has been classified as 'ornate, dense, and multi-layered', a characterization which could certainly be applied to this piece (Ellen Johnston Laing, 'Chin "Tartar" Dynasty (1115-1234) Material Culture', in *Artibus Asiae*, 49, nos 1-2 [1988-89], p. 119). The frame members are shaped with sharp 'sword-ridge' mouldings and terminate in short cabriole legs that stand upon floral pads. The drawers are each carved in high relief with figures in Song-style dress against a thick floral background. The two middle drawers are carved with a boy and a mermaid carrying large lotus blooms over their shoulders, and the central drawer of the three below is carved with a rabbit – a symbol long associated with fertility. This early iconography suggests the traditional family wish for longevity and increasing wealth through successive generations.

In the centre of the top drawer, a silver ingot is raised in relief in the heart of a square lotus-shaped rosette, where a brass coin is attached to the original iron drawer-pull as an escutcheon plate. The coin bears an inscription of the Zhenghe (1111-18) reign period which occurred during Huizong's (r. 1101-25) rule of the Northern Song empire (960-1127). The drawers of an early altar table in the C.L. Ma Collection are fitted with Jin period coins as escutcheon plates (Curtis Evarts, *C.L. Ma Collection: Traditional Chinese Furniture from the Greater*

Shanxi Region, Hong Kong, 1999, pl. 54). Numerous early Qing coffers from the Shanxi region can also be found that are similarly fitted with Shunzhi (1644-61), Kangxi (1662-1722), Yongzheng (1723-35) and Qianlong (1736-95) period coins. Research into this apparently customary practice may shed further light on the intriguing question of whether or not the dated coins correspond to the actual age of the objects.

Traditional Chinese furniture is clearly a subject still abundant with opportunity. For collectors, there are many interesting objects available at excellent cost/value ratios, as well as new directions in which to form unique collections. For connoisseurs and academics, there is a bounty of material that promises to yield further understanding of the history and development of Chinese furniture, regional tendencies and dating, all of which will eventually shed light on various aspects of Ming-style hardwood furniture. Several years ago, Craig Clunas advised Chinese furniture specialists of the need to see more objects in order to avoid the pitfalls 'of over-rigid generalizations formed on the basis of too little evidence' ('Book Review', in this volume, p. 346). The limitations of focusing too narrowly on a particular style of furniture without some sense of overview has become apparent during the author's recent immersion in the somewhat broader scope of traditional furniture from north-central China. In his preface to the resulting publication of this recent research, Wang Shixiang also echoed these sentiments with his inimitable poetical wisdom: 'Since I haven't even reached the ocean, how can I talk about water?' (Evarts, op. cit., p. 15). Maturity in the field of Chinese furniture will develop from the periodic reminder of how little we actually know, as well as from the fruits of our continued investigations into the unknown.

Curtis Evarts is the author of the recent publication *C.L. Ma Collection: Traditional Chinese Furniture from the Greater Shanxi Region*.