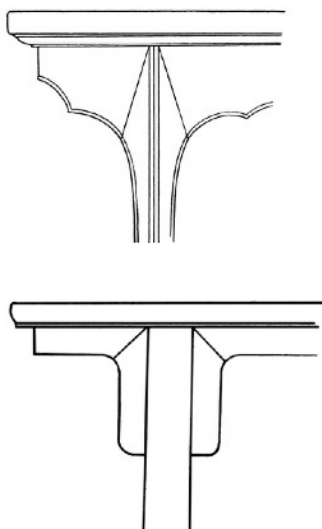


‘Crane’s-Knees’ and ‘Sword-Legs’: A Survey of the Ancient “Inserted-Shoulder-Joint” Table

Curtis Evarts



Alongside the minimalistic, linear forms of traditional ‘Ming-style’ Chinese furniture, more elaborate, curvilinear forms also existed. Such is the pattern with ‘crane’s knee legs’ or ‘sword legs’, which is also known by the construction term ‘inserted-shoulder-joint’ (cf. figs. 1ab). This technique, which was common to beds and tables, is evidenced as early as the Tang dynasty and—as both a traditional and archaic style—endured well into the Qing dynasty. Focusing on the category of tables, this essay explores its historical development and various terminologies, and further illustrates a few of the exemplary pieces that have survived to modern times.



While the ‘inserted-shoulder-joint’ pattern (fig. 2a) is qualified as a “recessed-leg” form, the construction technique differs from the more conventional “bridle joint” pattern (fig. 2b). The legs of the ‘inserted-shoulder-joint’ pattern, meet the apron with a flush, sword-tip-like miter, and they join within a single plane that is also united with a continuous decorative line. This is in contrast with the “bridle joint” technique, wherein the vertical leg extends through the horizontal apron and spandrel head. The former produces a decorative *humen*-shaped opening; the latter resembles architectural post-and-beam construction.



Early evidence of the ‘inserted-shoulder-joint’ pattern is found amongst excavated furniture as well as painted illustrations dating from the late Tang period throughout the Song dynasty. A low table with origins from a late Tang period excavation (fig. 3a) has legs shaped with a large foliate motif at the midpoint and *ruyi*-shaped feet; the top of the legs meet the narrow apron with a truncated miter, and the cusped and curvilinear outline flows continuously from side to side creating a decorative opening. Tang dynasty traditions are evident in many Liao dynasty objects, and numerous other low tables of similar style have been excavated from Liao tombs. The example illustrated as Figure 3b has stretchers on all sides and join

at the enlarged midpoints of the legs. Missing narrow aprons are a common issue with such excavated works; nonetheless, early renderings reveal a variety of apron styles. The detail from a Song period copy of a Tang painting illustrates a small table of standard height (fig. 4a). The thin legs are also shaped with a large foliate motif at the midpoint and *ruyi*-shaped feet, and stretchers mounted at the enlarged midpoints serve as reinforcement. Other examples—both excavated and depicted in paintings—reveal similar stretcher arrangements. Amongst these early examples, the aprons are also relatively narrow in depth. And while the overall technique is similar, the contoured outlines of the legs and aprons of each are uniquely styled (figs. 1a, 4a-f, 9b).



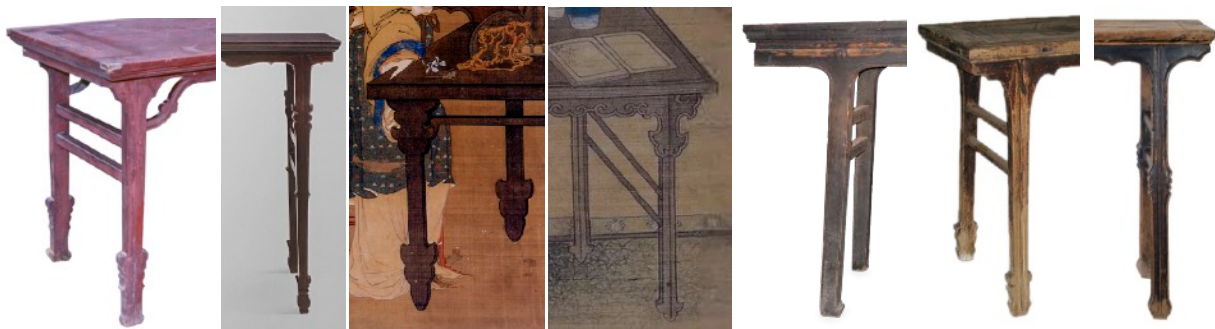
Although throughout the Ming dynasty it appears less frequently amongst excavated works and paintings, the form remained popular. Drawing inspiration from earlier paintings or themes, Tang Yin and Qiu Ying both depicted the table style. And while many tables of the type tend to be of smaller ‘wine table’ size (cf. figs. 5ab), larger forms used for painting or banquet gatherings were also depicted (figs. 5cd).



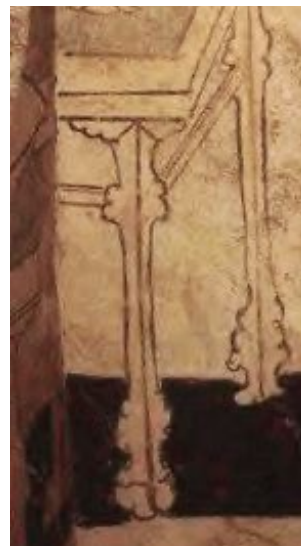
Many Ming period examples have survived, both large and small and, with and without intermediate stretchers. The large walnut table published by Ecke (fig. 6c) fits the category of painting tables, and the style of its contoured lines can also be compared with the numerous smaller examples with exquisite lacquer surfaces (cf. figs 6ab). The many similar examples that survive at the Palace Museum also demonstrates the popularity of its form at the late Ming court.



During the Ming period there is more variety in the contoured styling of the legs and aprons (cf. figs. 7a-e). The mid-point leg motif is often deleted, or at times appears to be integrated with the foot as a more elongated decoration. The aprons were at times more deeply curved. These characteristics are especially true of the late Ming period examples at the Palace and others (cf. fig. 7d).



The form continued to be produced well into the Qing dynasty, both as a traditional pattern as well as an archaic style. The latter is evident with a red lacquer table now housed in the Yangzhou Museum (fig. 8a); the tabletop bears a lengthy Qianlong period inscription stating that it was modeled after an ancient jade cart. And an 18th century *zitan* table in Palace collection also exhibits the elegant slender style of its Song predecessors (fig. 8b), and its inspiration could well have been drawn from a pattern in an early painting. Qing dynasty paintings also depict contemporary stylized forms (figs. 8cd). A hybrid style with waisted aprons and hoof feet also begins to appear in the early Qing dynasty (fig. 8e). And at the same time, traditional patterns continued to be reproduced—especially in conservative areas of north central China (cf. figs. 8fg). However, by the late Qing period, the form had greatly diminished in popularity.



Aside from the technical term ‘inserted-shoulder-joint’, the imagery-based expression ‘sword leg (*jiantui*)’ also refers the style of the slender leg with pointed miter tip at the top and sword-like handle at the base. The origin of this colloquial term has alluded furniture scholars until Yang Zhishui’s recent discovery of an indirectly related term: ‘cranes-knee (*hexi*)’. Her work *Exploration of Tang and Song Dynasty Furniture (Tangsong jiaju xunwei)* (pub. 2015) notes several references and concludes that a specific Song dynasty citation to ‘crane’s-knee tables (*hexi zhuo*)’ was a table “whose legs were shaped with a bamboo-node-

like protuberance at their midpoint.” The term ‘cranes-knee’ has ancient origins, and its relationship the ‘inserted-shoulder-joint’ as well as ‘sword-leg’ construction style can be woven together from the following sources:

- The Han dynasty dictionary *Fangyan* compiled by Yang Xiong (206-9 BC) explains the term’s relationship to a type of spear: “The common spear with a slender shank like the shin bone of a goose is called a ‘cranes-knee (*hexi*)’.” Related references to spears also appear in the 3rd century prose on the capital of Wu (*Wudu fu*).
- The Eastern Jin dynasty (317-420 AD) *Guozhu* provides further clarification, stating that “because cranes have bulging knees, the spears of the Wu (kingdom) with enlarged receptacles at the base of the spear tip (*maoxiao*) are called ‘crane’s knee’.”
- The Yuan dynasty treatise on bamboo *Zhupu xianglu* also notes a ‘crane’s knee bamboo (*hexi zhu*)’ from the region of Hangzhou which has nodes “that protrude like the knees of cranes.”
- The Southern Song *Record of Offices and Pavillions* provides the term’s first reference to furniture noting—amongst various furnishing required for Imperial offices—sixteen “crane’s knee tables (*hexi zhuo*)”.

These various references suggest the origin of both terms, ‘sword-leg’ and ‘crane’s knee’ tables. The term spear (*mao*) was also commonly used for swords. (And although perhaps a coincidence, the term ‘shoulder’ (*jian*) in Chinese is also a homonym with ‘sword’ (*jian*).) Regardless of sword or spear, the tips of both are pointed like the ‘inserted-shoulder-joint’. The bulging knee of a crane and/or protruding nodes of bamboo are also evident in the enlargement at midpoint of the slender, sword-like legs of many early tables of ‘inserted-shoulder-joint’ style (cf. figs. 9ab). Thus, these two characteristics also coincide with the Song dynasty reference to “crane’s knee tables”.

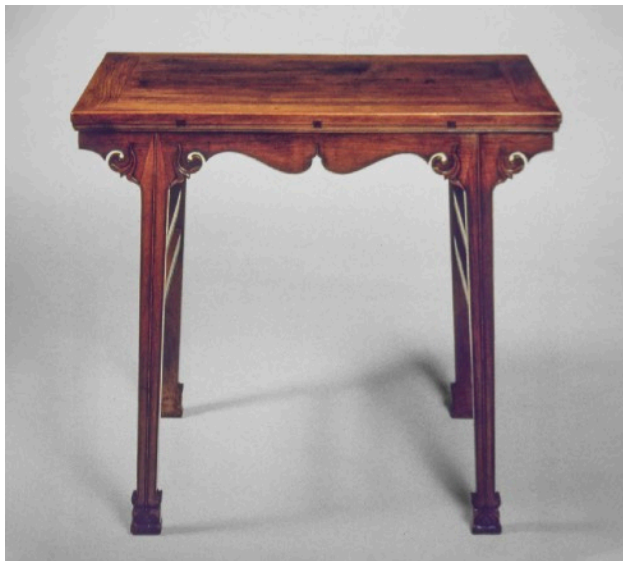
Although the term’s use may have been common during the Song dynasty, it seems to have slipped into obscurity in later times. It does not appear in the carpenter’s manual *Lu Ban jing* and has yet to be discovered in other Ming and Qing period literature. But following on Yang Zhishui’s findings, subsequent articles in Chinese by Zhang Zhihui “From Crane’s Knee Tables to a Round Tables: Furniture in a Portrait of Qianlong” (pub. 2018) and Tan Xiangdong “A Brief Survey of the The Crane’s Knee Table and a *Huanghuali* Inserted Shoulder Joint Table” (pub. 2021) have supported the revival of the ancient term ‘crane’s knee’. And while the association of sword (*jian*) to spear (*mao*) terminology remains somewhat tenuous, the sword-like imagery provided by the contoured table leg is at times quite clear.



Besides those already referred to, a few other fine examples of the type will be mentioned. The *huanghuali kang* table (fig. 10) recalls the form and style of the ancient low tables from Tang and Liao period excavations as noted above (figs. 3ab). The contoured profile of the short legs appear as a dagger inserted into the narrow aprons, and the line of the beaded profile oscillates with cusps and arches throughout the opening. It is a rare example amongst the many *huanghuali kang* tables that have survived.



Hardwood tables of inserted shoulder joint construction are relatively rare when compared to the many with round legs and bridle joints. Figure 1b exhibits an early style with slender 'crane's knee' legs and deeply contoured aprons. Its overall style is also similar to a rare example that I was introduced to many years ago (fig. 11) with removable legs and collapsible aprons. Thus, the apron heads are somewhat enlarged to ensure durability of use. The overall stance of both pieces echoes the antique style of earlier examples, and their detailing is exquisite.



A personal favorite for many years has been a *huanghuali* table in the Cheny Cowles collection. It is a small table. The deeply curved aprons are reminiscent of late Ming period tables at the Palace (fig. 12). However, the aprons begin to differ the juncture of the legs with pierced openwork and relief carving of budding growth. The splayed legs are also straight without contour, but beading and incense stick molding provide crisp refinement. The legs terminate with a sculpted foot comprised of hoof and carved pad, which is also similar again to the Palace tables.



The strong form—balanced with animation and subtle refinement—is a pleasure to behold.

While many of the inserted shoulder joint tables are of ‘wine-table’ proportion, a genre of narrower, longer side tables also exists. Such is the *huanghuali* table in the Nelson Atkins collection (fig. 13). Its overall style appears as a stretched version of the previous example, however the legs retain ‘crane’s knee’ decor, and the aprons are shaped with sun and moon disks. Both are imbued with the classical aesthetic.



The narrow form was also especially popular in the Jiangnan region, which is the origin of a number of examples made from *jumu* timber. The two examples illustrated here, both with everted flanges, are very similar in style. Figure 14a, which is in the Palace Museum collection has a black lacquer finish; figure 14b is a *jumu* table. The pierced apron heads of both exhibit a compact *ruyi* design and the straight legs with incense stick moulding terminate with hoof feet resting on a pad. The elongated form with narrow aprons and slender legs is endowed with classical elegance.



The black lacquer table (fig. 15) exhibits a slender ‘crane’s-knee’ style without pronounced foot. Its light and airy (*kongling*) form recalls the Song aesthetic without beleaguered repetition.



Finally, the *zitan* table (fig. 16)...., ah, pure synthesis of the ancient form. Such innovation is indeed unique. And may such examples inspire modern-day craftsmen to continue the great tradition of Chinese furniture!

This ancient pattern—by whatever name we choose to use—lingered quietly throughout the centuries, ever remaining in touch with its roots. And even while conforming to changing times, it continued to display an ancient aesthetic of refined elegance.

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