

WANG SHIXIANG

CLASSIC
CHINESE FURNITURE

— MING AND EARLY QING DYNASTIES



Introduction

I The Golden Age

The history of Chinese furniture has been marked by the gradual change from low pieces to pieces of the height to which we are accustomed today. From the 15th century BC to the 3rd century AD people conducted their daily lives on a low platform covered with a mat, on which they knelt or sat cross-legged and used low pieces of furniture. In the 3rd century ideas about the propriety of kneeling began to change, as did social customs, and people started to sit with legs extended and to adopt leaning positions. As a result armrests (Fig. 1.1) and cushions (Fig. 1.2) appeared.¹ The practice of sitting with legs pendent on hourglass-shaped stools made of straw and basketwork (Fig. 1.3)² began in the period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties (386-589). By the Tang dynasty (618-907) not only were stools and chairs quite common but high tables were also used. None the less, during this transitional period people still knelt or sat cross-legged on low platforms.

By the Northern Song (960-1127) all kinds of high furniture became prevalent and craftsmanship much more refined. In the Southern Song (1127-1279) most of the types of furniture found in Ming times had already appeared. These sowed the seed for the blossoming of the furniture tradition during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) and early part of the Qing dynasty, up to 1735. By the Qianlong reign (1736-95) furniture had completely changed and become overly elaborate, although the materials and craftsmanship were still of excellent quality. In the latter part of the Qing dynasty China became a semi-feudal, semi-colonized society and the tradition of fine furniture, together with all the other arts, declined.

The style of living and the kinds of furniture used during the Song dynasty differed from those of earlier times. Undoubtedly there must have been some very good pre-Song pieces, but so little has survived that our knowledge of pre-Song furniture is very limited. It is only from Ming and early Qing times that pieces of furniture of high-quality material and craftsmanship have been preserved from the large numbers that were made. Thus this period is called the golden age of classic Chinese furniture.

Furniture reached such a level of perfection at this time as a result of the Song dynasty heritage, as well as for various other reasons. I shall now discuss two of the most important of these reasons. First, with the development of commerce and the consequent economic prosperity during the Ming dynasty, both city and country life flourished. This had an effect on social customs, and most people began to want good furniture. Second, the open-door policy led to the

importation of many goods, including large quantities of hardwood which was so essential for fine furniture.

According to *Ming shu* (*Ming History*), in the Xuande reign (1426-35) thirty-three large cities, including Beijing and Nanjing, had customs houses.³ After mid Ming another twenty or thirty were added to this list and the large cities became even more prosperous. For instance, in Nanjing after the Wanli reign (1573-1620) commerce flourished and the population increased. Xie Zhaozhe in his *Wu za zu* (*Compendium of Knowledge Classified into Five Parts*) says:

The streets of Nanjing are so wide that nine chariots can ride abreast. Recently there has been such an increase in population that shops are beginning to encroach upon these roads.⁴

In *Wu Qing Zhen zhi* (*Gazetteer of Wuzhen and Qingzhen* [in Zhejiang Province]) it is recorded that:

Wuzhen on the east and Qingzhen in Tongxiang on the west face each other. Since there has been a long period of peace the population is continually increasing. For three miles the houses almost touch each other and one can see the chimneys of 10,000 families ... the area is extensive, families are numerous, and there is nothing that the hundred kinds of craftsmen do not produce.⁵

In such towns as Zhenze, Pingwang, Shuangyang, Yanmu, Tanqiu and Meiyan in northern Zhejiang which were centres of silk manufacture as well as entrepôts, the population and trade volume increased by up to tenfold between the Jiajing (1522-66) and Wanli (1573-1620) reigns.⁶ Although the gazetteers did not mention furniture manufacture, furniture is a necessity of daily life and so must have been one of the developing and prospering crafts.

In Ming dynasty texts there are records of the popular demand for hardwood furniture from mid Ming. A most important passage on the widespread fashion of using hardwood furniture is found in *Yunjian jumu chao* (*Record of Things seen in Yunjian*) by Fan Lian (born 1540):

When I was young I saw but a few pieces of furniture, such as writing tables and large chairs, made from fine wood. The common people only had pieces made from ginkgo wood and gold tinted lacquer square tables. Mo Tinghan and the young gentlemen of the Gu and Song families began the practice of bringing a few pieces of fine wood furniture to Yunjian [near present-day Shanghai] from Suzhou. During the Longqing [1567-72] and Wanli periods, even lower officials began to use fine wooden furniture, and cabinetmakers from Huizhou [in Anhui Province] opened shops in Yunjian where they made wedding furniture and other objects. At that time the wealthy families did not consider *ju* wood good enough and so it had become customary for them to have all their beds, cabinets and tables made from *huali* wood, burl wood, blackwood, *xiangsi* wood [*jichi* wood], and boxwood. This furniture is very fine and exorbitant, each piece costing 10,000 cash, a most extravagant custom. It is strange that even those policemen who had a home would arrange a comfortable place to rest, separated by wooden partitions. In the courtyard they raised goldfish and planted various kinds of flowers. Inside there were good-quality wooden tables and a horsetail whisk for dusting. They called it the study. However, I really do not know what books they studied!⁷

Wang Shixing in *Guang zhi yi* (*On a Variety of Subjects*) records that:

The people of Suzhou, being very clever and fond of antiques, were skilled at using old methods to make things . . . such as small treasures for the study, tables and beds. Recently they have liked to use *zitan* and *huali* woods. They preferred plain to elaborately carved pieces; but if they used decoration it always followed the ancient patterns of the Shang, Zhou, Qin and Han dynasties. This fashion spread all over China and was especially popular during the Jiajing, Longqing and Wanli reigns.⁸

These quotations are very important for the history of Ming period furniture since they record that hardwood furniture became popular from the middle of the dynasty, and they mention Suzhou, the centre of the manufacture of fine furniture. The fashion for good furniture raised both the quality and the quantity to an unprecedentedly high level.

Wood is basic to the manufacture of furniture; if there is not enough local wood it must be imported. In the Longqing reign China instituted an open-door policy which is described by Zhou Qiyuan in his preface to Zhang Xie's *Dong xi yang kao* (*Studies on Countries to the East and West*):

At the end of the Longqing reign the Emperor abolished the law prohibiting trade with foreign nations. Since then merchants from all over have been trading on the seas and many valuable goods are imported, so that rare goods are becoming more common. Each year this commerce involves hundreds of thousands of cash, and both the government and private merchants depend upon it, almost as though it were the Emperor's Southern Storehouse.⁹

By abolishing the law prohibiting trade with foreign countries, the Emperor established an open-door policy permitting sea trade and private trade with foreign lands. Since Indochina produced quantities of precious hardwood, it is most likely that a great deal was imported and that the manufacture of furniture was thus stimulated.

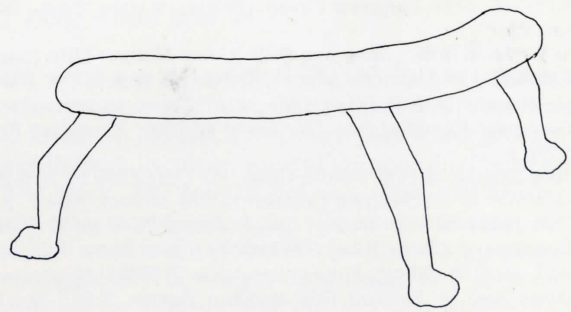
The above quotations from contemporaneous texts show that within the golden age of Chinese furniture, the greatest flourishing of classic Chinese furniture occurred in the period from mid Ming, beginning with the Jiajing reign in the 1520s. This was not accidental but the result of circumstances closely related to the social and economic conditions of the time. From the discussion of different aspects of Ming and early Qing furniture in the following chapters, there will be no doubt that this period is indeed the golden age of classic Chinese furniture.

Notes

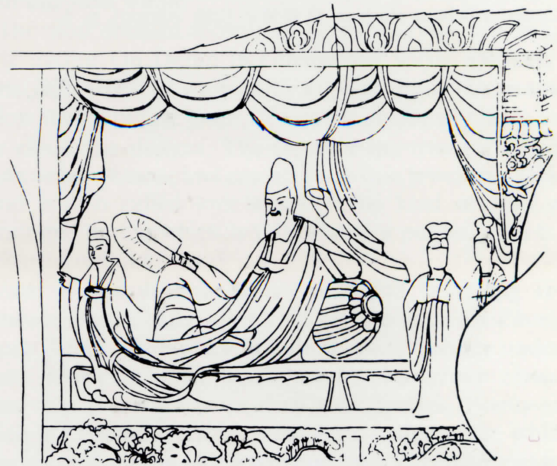
1. Armrests are curved pieces of wood with three legs which can be put on a bed for a person to lean on either forwards or backwards. A pottery armrest was found among the spirit goods in tomb number 1 at Zhaoshigang in Jiangning. It is illustrated by Jiangsu Sheng Wenwu Guanli Weiyuanhui 江蘇省文物管理委員會 (CPAM, Jiangsu Province), in "Nanjing jinjiao Liuchao mu de qingli 南京近郊六朝墓的清理" ("The Excavation of Six Dynasties Tombs in the Suburbs of Nanjing"), *Kaogu xuebao*, 1957: 1, plate II.

Large bag-like cushions (*yinnang* 隱囊) are also used for leaning against. In the Binyang Cave at Longmen, Vimalakirti is shown seated upon a bed and reclining against such a cushion. The drawing is traced from Fu Yunzi 傅芸子, *Zhengcangyuan kaogu ji* 正倉院考古記 (*Notes on the Antiquities in the Shosoin*) (Tokyo: Bunkyo-dō 文求堂, 1941), p. 91, plate 23.

2. Hourglass-shaped stools (*quanti* 筌蹄, literally bamboo fish trap) are high, narrow, waisted seats, such as that depicted in a Northern Wei dynasty wall painting in Dunhuang, Cave 285. See Dunhuang Wenwu Yanjiu Suo 敦煌文物研究所 (Dunhuang Research Institute), *Dunhuang bishua ji* 敦煌壁畫集 (*Dunhuang Wall Paintings*) (Beijing: Wenwu Press, 1975), plate 18, top. Hourglass-shaped stools can also be seen in a relief in the Lianhua Cave at Longmen (west side of niche no. 2 on the lower row of the south wall): Longmen Baoguan Suo 龍門保管所 (Longmen Preservation Institute), *Longmen shiku*



1.1 Pottery armrest unearthed from a Six Dynasties tomb in the suburbs of Nanjing



1.2 Cushion depicted in Northern Wei relief in the Binyang Cave, Longmen



1.3 Hourglass-shaped stool depicted in Northern Wei relief in the Lianhua Cave, Longmen



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①



②

112 Ming dynasty *huanghuali* wood small painting table with recessed legs and elongated bridge joints

Height 82 cm, top 107 cm × 70 cm

① Elongated bridge joint

② Marble top

Beijing Timber Factory Collection



Afterword

As the Chinese have given us one of the world's great cuisines, they have also created one of the major traditions in furniture. Both are basic arts of daily use, on which people depend for their practical needs in everyday life. When pragmatic and aesthetic considerations in these arts are felicitously combined, as in the furniture of the Ming and early Qing dynasties, the result is both functional and beautiful. Although the tradition of Chinese furniture goes back to at least the 4th century BC — and a few rare pieces of early furniture have indeed survived — the great period of extant examples is Ming and early Qing. This period of splendour is covered in this volume by Wang Shixiang, the world's foremost authority on Chinese furniture.

Wang Shixiang has diverse expertise and is, like the furniture he studies and illuminates, something of an authentic relic, no longer made today. This is to say, he is a traditional Chinese intellectual with immense knowledge in all the arts, including literature and calligraphy. He has written major treatises on Chinese music, painting, ancient lacquer, and bamboo carving and his studies range from Fujian handicrafts to pigeon whistles. Appropriate to the humanist Eastern tradition he represents, he is also famous in Beijing as a gourmet cook, and served as an adjudicator in the recent national cuisine competition (establishing the hierarchy of chefs in China), which, to be sure, he recorded in an article on Chinese cuisine.

From a family of scholars and diplomats, Wang Shixiang was educated at the American School in Beijing and Yenching University, becoming part of a bilingual and bicultural circle of Chinese intellectuals. During World War II he left Beijing to join the community of refugee scholars in Sichuan. Here he worked with Liang Sicheng, the great historian of Chinese architecture, who was trained at the University of Pennsylvania. Later Wang applied Liang's careful methodology to the study of Chinese furniture. As a result of this experience with Liang's work, he has also been very much aware of the close relationship between architecture and furniture, in their forms, structure, development, and even terminology. In the late forties, he travelled in America and Canada as a Rockefeller research fellow, studying the Chinese art collections in their museums.

After working in the Palace Museum and in the Institute of Research in Chinese Music, during the bleak years of the Cultural Revolution, Wang Shixiang was sent, along with most Chinese intellectuals and artists, "down to the countryside", where he took care of pigs and oxen. Now a senior fellow at the Research Institute of Ancient Texts, Cultural Relics Bureau, he is the international authority on Chinese furniture and in 1983 went to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London for consultation and to lecture. In his capacity as art historian he accompanied in 1980 the "Great Bronze Age of China" exhibition, which was shown in several museums in the United States.

Furniture is the centre of Wang Shixiang's world. During more than forty years of dedication to furniture, he has acquired, restored and now possesses the most important private collection of Chinese furniture in the world. Much of his time he has spent searching for rare pieces, which he has photographed and documented when unable to purchase them. Many of the pieces illustrated in this book come from his own choice collection. These he has lived with, studied, and taken apart to have measured drawings made showing their construction.

Wang Shixiang has acquired knowledge of furniture by going to the living sources, the cabinetmakers. When repairs were necessary he carefully watched cabinetmakers at work in order to learn the secrets of their craft. The living tradition has until now been largely oral, but from the makers Wang Shixiang has learned and recorded the rich technical vocabulary of their art. Some of these terms appeared in earlier texts, such as the Qing dynasty manufacturing regulations and *Lu Ban Jing jiangjia jing*, (*Lu Ban's Classic: A Manual for Craftsmen*). These sources were sometimes inexact or even erroneous, and so he published studies in which he corrected the texts and standardized a specific furniture lexicon.

Classic Chinese Furniture is Wang Shixiang's first full-length volume on furniture. It will be followed in the near future by a larger and more detailed volume in the same area. All the pieces illustrated in *Classic Chinese Furniture* are in Chinese collections and most are published in English for the first time. Wang's work is actually the first major scholarly book in the field written in Chinese; prior to this all significant volumes on Chinese furniture were put together by Western art historians. His tome continues and expands the work begun in the 1940s by Gustav Ecke and George Kates, who together with other foreign residents of Beijing at that time bought classic Chinese furniture to furnish their homes. Later, in the 1970s, R.H. Ellsworth and Michel Beurdeley, two dealers and collectors, published illustrated books with some background information.

In *Classic Chinese Furniture*, Wang Shixiang makes seminal contributions to these earlier studies. He arranges the pieces so as to show the development of types and styles, beginning with the simplest, followed by their more complicated variations, and ending with their transformations. He divides all furniture into waisted and waistless categories, thus showing their distinct forms and origins. He even includes detailed investigations of the historical background and of the places of manufacture.

An original and very special contribution to the history of Chinese furniture is Wang Shixiang's definition of the numerous terms used in the old texts and by cabinetmakers. As co-translator of Wang's text, I had to find, invent and sometimes magically concoct an English equivalent for the huge technical vocabulary given to us by the author; this was surely my most formidable task. At times an unavoidable awkwardness enters the English text, which I have tolerated for the sake of consistency. In all, I construed an English glossary of about one thousand terms, for this book and Wang's forthcoming larger volume.

I wish to thank the Committee for Scholarly Communications with the People's Republic of China (CSCPRC) for the fellowship which has permitted me to do research in China and undertake the co-translation of Wang Shixiang's pioneer work.

Sarah Handler
Beijing, 1985

