

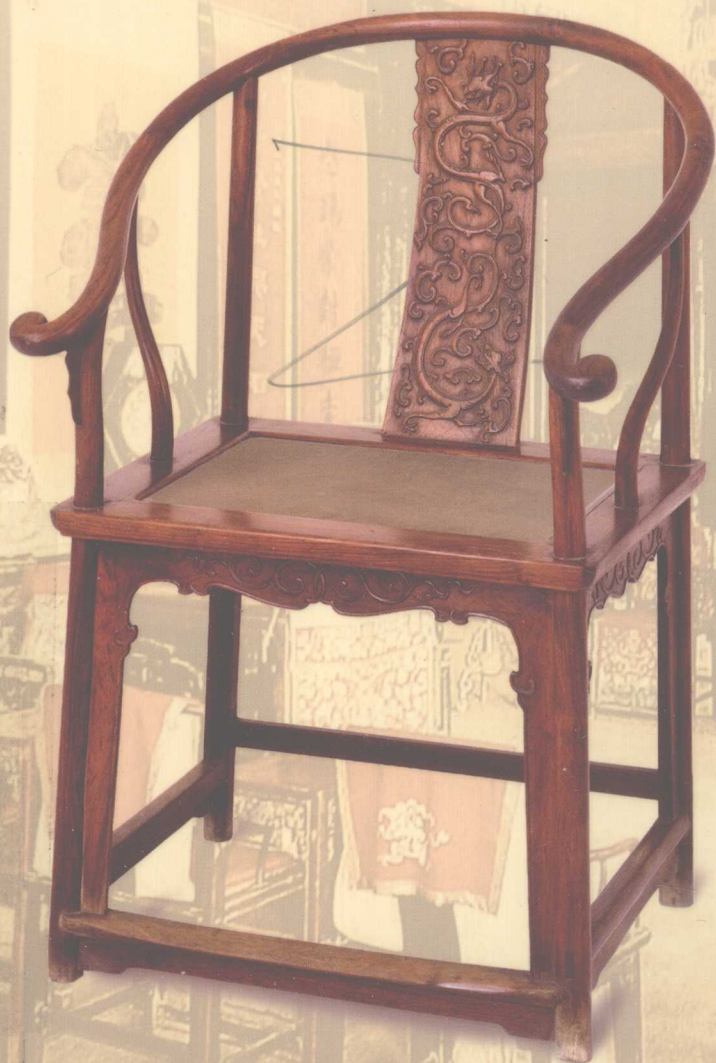
● Cultural China Series

Zhang Xiaoming

# CHINESE FURNITURE

Exploring China's Furniture Culture

Translated by Kang Jian, Han Huizhi & Wang Wenliang



CHINA  
INTERCONTINENTAL  
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# Preface

Step into the magnificent Imperial Palace in Beijing and feast your eyes on the throne and screen with dragon and phoenix designs. Walk into the Qiao Family Grand Courtyard in Shanxi and caress the rough and simple tables and chairs. Wander around Wu Town, a small town along the lower reaches of the Yangtze River in Zhejiang, and find king-size antique beds with intricately carved patterns. Stroll through the classical gardens of Suzhou dotted with exquisite furniture. In all these places you might wonder how the ingenious and delicate furniture was designed, created, painted, decorated, maintained and left in its current state.

You also might wonder who was the proud owner of these pieces. Was it an emperor with great talent and bold vision? Was it a patriotic and unlucky literati, a rich merchant, or a simple ordinary person? You might wonder what kind of life the owner lived and experiences he went through.

Or maybe you are not conscious of anything but prefer to simply indulge in the details of the furniture of their color, luster, feel, surface, body, leg and foot, shape, outline, line and framework.

You might give the pieces of furniture enough time and space to display their beauty and tell their own stories.

That's furniture, which accompanies people's lives.

Chinese furniture marks many of the historical and cultural accomplishments from the long history of people. First, furniture is needed to meet the needs of every day life. Following changes in society, lifestyles and the development of technical skills,



## CHINESE FURNITURE

furniture is a constantly changing presence that integrates scientific fidelity, artistic quality and practicality.

Over time, furniture has evolved. It is no longer a simple necessity and expression of craftsmanship. Today, the furniture is evidence of China's historical development and a symbol of Chinese culture.

People like and live with the furniture, because it is fitting company for life. People cherish furniture as a handy art treasure, elegant and charming.

With abundant masterpieces, Chinese furniture has a distinctive oriental style. Let's walk into the world of Chinese furniture.



# Long History

Chinese furniture started as stone and bronze furniture of several thousand years ago. Following changes in lifestyles, Chinese furniture has evolved from low-rise furniture to high-rise furniture.

Chinese furniture has historical meaning and tracks developments of Chinese history.

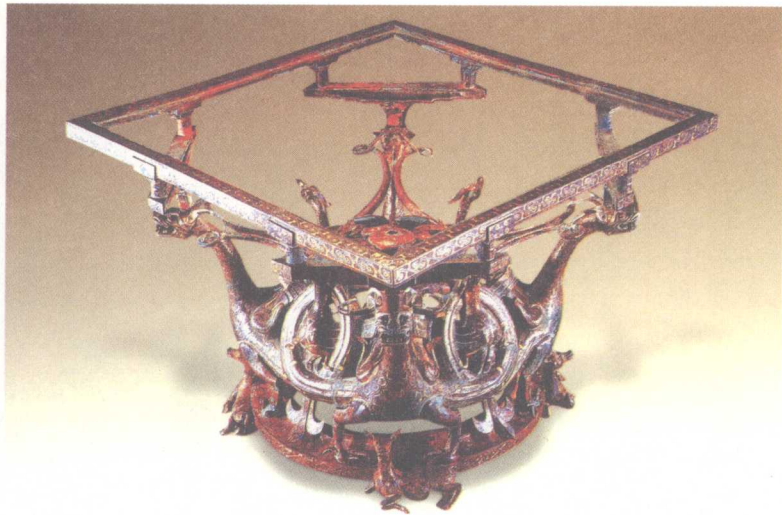




## Bronze and Lacquered Wooden Furniture in the Shang and Western Zhou Dynasties

A practical stack of stones might be the ancestor of primitive furniture. The Tu Kang (heatable adobe sleeping platform), used by Chinese living up to seven thousand years ago, was uncovered in Banpo Village in Xi'an, Shaanxi province. The Tu Kang is only 10 cm in height but it is regarded as the ancestor of the bed and the earliest Chinese furniture.

A wooden table with painted designs was unearthed in the Taosi Remains, Xiangfen County, Shanxi province, in 1978. The wooden table with color paint on its top and the sides of its feet is regarded as the oldest piece of wooden furniture unearthed so far in China.



A small bronze stand, the Warring States

It is unearthed from Zhongshan Prince Cuo's Mausoleum in Hebei province. Though its surface is damaged, the bracket left is still extremely exquisite.



China entered the Bronze Age during the Shang Dynasty (1600–1046 BC) when sacrifices were still being practices. Parts of bronze sacrificial vessels are regarded as early examples of furniture. This includes the bronze chopping block used to slaughter animals and display animal sacrifices and the bronze jin, a type of table to display wine vessels.

The bronze vessels made in the Shang Dynasty (1046–221 BC) with ornamental patterns are often mysterious, solemn, majestic and rough. They were improved during the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046–771 BC) when advanced techniques like separate casting, welding, wax-lost casting and inlay also emerged. The well-built bronze vessels in the Western Zhou Dynasty show exquisite workmanship. The square bronze table unearthed in Zhongshan Prince Cuo's Mausoleum of the Warring Periods (475–221 BC) is designed with patterns of four dragons and four phoenixes and composed of a round base with patterns of four deer and the arch supports the rim on both sides of the table. Bronze bases unearthed at the same time include vivid shapes of tigers, bulls and rhinoceroses.

Productivity and living conditions were greatly improved during the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period (770–221 BC). As iron-making techniques improved, a large number of manufacturing tools and equipment emerged



A bronze lamp hanger, the Warring States Period  
It is unearthed from Zhongshan Prince Cuo's Mausoleum in Hebei.  
The lamp hanger is in the shape of a tree with bronze dragons, monkeys and birds of different postures.





A painted lacquered screen, the Warring States Period  
It is unearthed from the tomb of Wangshan in Jiangling, Hubei province. The screen is 51.7 cm wide and 14.7 cm high and carved with more than 50 vivid images of various animals.

that made it easier to manufacture wooden furniture.

According to an old story, a carpenter called Lu Ban invented the saw, drill, plane, shovel, carpenter's square, carpenter's sink marker and other tools during one of these early periods. Lu Ban is regarded as the father of carpentry.

At the time, the main examples of wooden furniture included beds, tables, desks, clothes racks and screens. Tables and desks were very short due to the daily habits in ancient China. Sitting on the ground one's knees or cross-legged was common.

The oldest bed found to date is a king-sized painted bed unearthed in Xinyang, Henan province. The bed is supported by six feet designed with patterns of clouds. The bed surface and the bed feet are beautiful and firm. The use of multiple tenon methods to join together the various parts emerges as an important character of Chinese furniture.

The tenon-and-mortise structure took its initial shape in the Warring States Period. According to records, the screen to divide indoors spaces was first used during the Shang and Western Zhou dynasties. The techniques and decoration of the tenon-and-mortise structure were fairly exquisite during the Spring and

#### Lu Ban

Lu Ban (507–444 BC) was a good observer of everything around him and was good at inventing tools in practice, such as saw, carpenter's folder ruler, carpenter's ink marker, plane, and drill. It is said that, one day, he cut his finger by a kind of serrated grass while working. Later, he invented saw based on the serrated edge of grass. Because of his outstanding achievements, he has been honored as the Chinese master carpenter and the "founder of carpentry."



Autumn Period and the Warring States Period.

Most wooden furniture is decorated with coats of lacquer. Lacquering techniques are featured in ancient literature. During the New Stone Age, lacquer was obtained from the *Rhus Vernicifera* tree. According to an unearthened fragment, lacquering techniques were used on beds, tables, chests and other furniture during the Shang Dynasty. A lacquered Zu was discovered in the Western Zhou Tomb. Lacquering technique improved during the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period as bronze was replaced by lacquer. Many new varieties of lacquers emerged and the technique was used on a number of different ways, including the lacquered Zu, lacquered desk, lacquered bed, lacquered chest and lacquered table. Ornamental techniques were also rich and varied.

A well-preserved wooded lacquered chest, which is the earliest chest in China, was unearthened from the Tomb of Marquis Yi of the Zeng State in Suizhou, Hubei province. It dates back to the early Warring States Period. The chest was painted with many fascinating mystic patterns such as monsters, the legendary Fu Xi (god of fishery and husbandry), the goddess of sky-patching, the story of Houyi (a legendary hero who shot down nine suns) and the diagram of the 28 constellations. Such mystic patterns reveal people's knowledge of the universe during the Warring States Period.

A caved wood desk unearthened in Xinyang, Henan province, adopts lacquering techniques, color painting and artistic carving. A painted lacquer screen from the Warring States Period unearthened in Wangshan, Hubei province, was painted with an elaborate scene of various animals including phoenix, birds, deers, snakes and frogs. The technique used to finish the metal was also very advanced for the time. The square bronze table mentioned above was decorated with a pattern of dragon scales, phoenix feathers and clouds and displayed a metal finishing





technique. The bronze screen was prettied up with metal finishing technique, which makes the pattern more vivid. Besides the pattern of black decoration on a red background, some furniture is also inlaid with ivory.

That shows the craftsmen had mastered the key ornamental techniques of Chinese furniture including lacquering, color painting, artistic caving and inlay techniques and underlines the brilliant artistic achievements in ornamental technology in China over two thousand years ago.

## Dwarf Furniture Centered with Bed in the Qin and Han Dynasties

Only a few years passed from the unification of China under the Emperor Shihuang of the Qin Dynasty (259–210 BC) to the end of the Dynasty (221–206 BC), no examples of furniture from the Qin Dynasty have been found so far. It has been said that the E-Pang Palace, built during the Qin Dynasty, was so large and its furnishings so sumptuous that when it was burnt down the fire lasted three months.

The Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) marked the first golden age of China's feudal society. The large number of mural paintings,



*Yanyin Baixi Tu* (scene of a banquet and acrobatics show), the Eastern Han Dynasty  
It is a fragment of the murals of the tomb of the Han Dynasty in Dahuting, Mixian County, Henan province. From the mural, we can see the tables and mats at the time.



portrait bricks, stone reliefs, mock-up furniture and furniture unearthed from tombs are testament to the workmanship of the period. There are plenty of examples such as the Yanyin Baixi Tu (scene of a banquet and acrobatics show) unearthed in the Eastern-Han Tomb in Dahuting, Mi County, Henan province; the Yinyan Tu (scene of a banquet), a portrait brick from the Han Dynasty unearthed in Chengdu, Sichuan province; a mural unearthed in Zhucun, Luoyang, Henan province; mural paintings from a Han-tomb unearthed in Wangdu County, Hebei province.

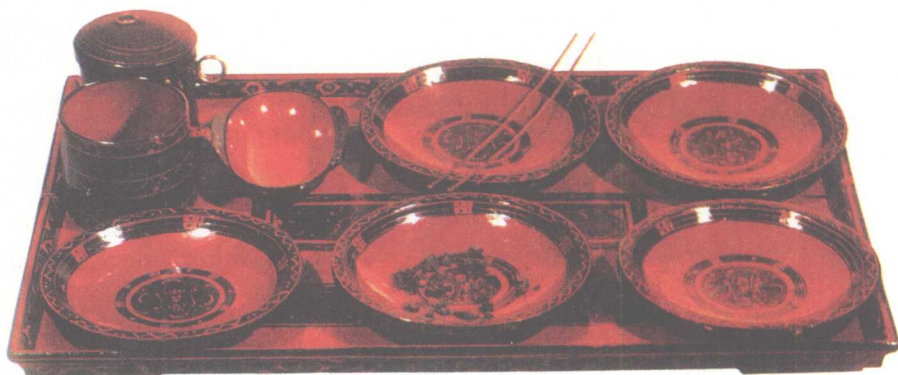
During the Han Dynasty, people were still used to sitting on the ground. As a result, furniture was mostly dwarf-style furniture centered with the bed. This type of furniture is generally less than 50 cm in height. Bronze furniture was, by then, generally out of service, while lacquered wooden furniture had become more predominant. There were a lot of different types of furniture used during the Han Dynasty such as mats, beds, couches, desks, tables, chests, cabinets, screens and the *huchuang* (a kind of seat). Most furniture had no permanent position and was distributed on an ad hoc basis.

Beds used during the Han Dynasty were multifunctional. They were used not only as beds and lounges but also as dining tables and to receive guests. The upper classes were particular about their beds. Some people added screens, curtains or even valuables including jewelry to make the beds more beautiful and display the status and wealth of their owners.

Couches were lower and smaller than beds. There is an old saying, "3.5 chi-long bedding is called a couch and 8 chi-long bedding is called bed." Couches could sit either one or two people and were used for dignitaries or guests.

There were various styles of desks and tables, which were used to hold articles and for support. Tables, rectangular or circular in shape and supported by dwarf feet, were similar to large trays used to this day. A painted lacquered table unearthed in No 1





A painted lacquered table, the Han Dynasty

It is unearthed from the Tomb of the Han Dynasty at Mawangdui, Changsha, Hunan province. Its paintings and colors fully display the romantic and vigorous atmospheres of the Han Dynasty.

Han Tomb at Mawangdui, Changsha, Hunan province, had a 60 cm by 40 cm surface and a flat base. It was supported by 2-cm dwarf feet at each corner. It was 6 cm in height. The surface is painted with a pattern of double panes of black and red lacquer. An elegant cloud pattern painted with red and sage green on black ground flows across the panes and the table center.

Most chests and cabinets used for storage are small and exquisite. Early large wardrobes look like small wooded storeroom with a roof on the top—similar to storage rooms.

According to written records, the *huchuang* brought from the western regions exerted great influence on the traditional lifestyle of the Chinese people during the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220). The *huchuang* is a kind of seat used on horses by minorities from the northwest. It is collapsible and portable and eventually evolved into a folding chair. The *huchuang* changed the habit of sitting on the ground, it helped raise the height of desks and tables and encourage the shift from dwarf furniture to high furniture.

The lacquer used on Chinese furniture during the Han Dynasty



also entered a new age.

Besides traditional lacquer painting, the embossing lacquer technique, which uses stiff lacquer to create a pattern, emerged during the period. The lacquered wooden furniture with color painting dazzles the eye with its black and red tones. Some examples are decorated with gold, silver and copper ornaments, jewelry and glass. According to written records describing the lacquered wooded screen, "one screen requires the full efforts of thousands of people."

Producing this type of furniture requires plenty of manpower and resources. The lacquered screen with bronze frame unearthed from the Nanyue King's Tomb of Western Han in Guangzhou is 3 m in width. It is a giant antique screen, well preserved over two thousand years. It is luxurious and peculiar in workmanship. The writing table with patterns of eight dragons playing in the water unearthed from the Han Tomb of Tangzhuang, Lianyungang, Jiangshu, is most magnificent and exquisite.

## **New Lifestyles Initiated by Cultural Exchange in the Wei, Jin & Northern and Southern Dynasties**

The country was in a state of anarchy and war for years during the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern dynasties (265–589) and cultural exchanges developed in an unprecedented scale. This period is one of the very few periods of ethnic cultural fusion. People's spiritual lives were free and open and a number of outstanding masters emerged who generally sequestered themselves from the world. Buddhism from India was also introduced. Moreover, improvements in architecture helped increase indoor space. The lifestyle of northwest minorities gradually exerted influence on the Central Plains, especially







Luoshen Appraisal Painting (luo shen fu) by Gu Kaizhi, the Eastern Jin Dynasty  
The couch described in the painting also belongs to the dwarf furniture.

changes of sitting posture from the kneeling position to sitting with legs apart or sprawled out—similar to a monk's cross-legged setting posture. Another position, sitting with two legs drooped, also became popular at that time and is common to this day. As common postures changed, dwarf furniture evolved into high furniture.

Unfortunately, few articles of high furniture are left from the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern dynasties to the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). According to statues and murals in the Dunhuang Grottoes and the Longman Grottoes, not only the *Huchang*, brought in during the late Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220) but also the new tall seat became popular. The new articles of furniture include armchairs, stool with wrap-around arms, round tables, long stools and wardrobes. The height of the bed was greatly increased. People could sit on the bed and on the bed edge with

