

Introduction of Wen Qiangang

Wen Qiangang was born on October 22, 1941 in Fengcheng City, Liaoning Province. In 1954 his father sent him to Beijing to attend middle school, then in 1958 he entered Beijing Arts and Crafts Vocational School and majored in sculpting and carving. In August 1961, Wen Qiangang was accepted into the Beijing Arts and Crafts Vocational School Graduate Program and twelve months later he started working at the Beijing Carved Lacquerware Factory. Under the direction of the master craftsmen Zhou Changtai and Wang Deliang, Wen learned the art of carving. Later, with master craftsmen Sun Caiwen and Zhu Tingren, he studied carved lacquerware design. In 1966 the Beijing Carved Lacquerware Factory established the “Innovation Team”, which Wen Qiangang led of twenty mid-level artisans, who researched how to modernize lacquerware carving, developing numerous tools and methods for molding lacquerware. In 1980 Wen Qiangang was appointed director of the Creative Development Department at the Beijing Carved Lacquerware Factory. As director he started to combine lacquerware techniques with sculpting to create three-dimensional lacquerware pieces. His lacquerware carving, “Tang-Style Horse”, was so popular that Beijing Carved Lacquerware Factory struggled to manufacture enough to meet the demands of buyers. In 1995, Wen Qiangang became head master craftsman at Beijing Carved Lacquerware Factory.

For the past few years Wen has been exploring the continuation of this ancient art form, in combination with modern day techniques and aesthetics, to create a large volume



Large Vase of Bountiful Wealth and Strength (2001)



Purple Clay Pot with Little Dragons (2003)

of pieces that redefine the value and worth of contemporary carved lacquerware craftsmanship. The red carving, or *tihong*¹, lacquer works Wen Qiangang has created following this new style include “Plate with Five Dragons Playing in the Sea” (1997), displayed at the Great Hall of the People; “Large Vase of Bountiful Wealth and Strength” (2001), displayed at the Hall of the Central Military Committee Review; “Purple Clay Pot with Little Dragons (2003), which was award a gold medal at the First Beijing Arts and Crafts Exhibition and now belongs to a private collection; “Plum Vase” (2004), which won first prize at the Fifth Annual Chinese Arts and Crafts Fair of the 2004 China Hangzhou West Lake Master Works Exposition and is now in a private collection; red carving “Plate with Nine Dragons Playing in the Sea” (2005), for which Wen again won first place at the Sixth Annual Chinese Arts and Crafts Fair of the China Hangzhou West Lake Master Works Exposition, now in a private collection; a *tihong* mural “He

1. “Red carving”, referred to hereafter as *tihong*, is the traditional skill of engraving on red lacquer. Objects such as plates or pots receive several coats of red lacquer, which is afterward carved to create a high-relief design. *Tihong* is a carved lacquerware technique characteristic of Beijing arts and crafts.



He Yuan Tower Tide Chart(2006)

Yuan Tower Tide Chart” (2006), called by the Beijing Traditional Arts and Crafts Review Committee to be “A treasure among Beijing arts and crafts”; *tihong* “Silver Lined Teapot with Lychee Fruit” (2007), which was awarded a gold medal for the “Beijing Artisans Cup” at the Third Annual Beijing Art Exhibition and is now in a private collection; *tihong* “Throne Screen with Tang Dynasty Poems” (2008), now in a private collection; and the hanging screen “Listening to the Waves” (2009), for which he again was awarded the gold medal for the “Beijing Artisans Cup” at the Fourth Annual Beijing Art Exhibition.



Throne Screen with Tang Dynasty Poems(2008)



Listening to the Waves(2009)

In addition Wen Qiangang contributes his time as a member of the Beijing Review Committee of the Traditional Arts and Crafts and the Beijing Arts and Crafts Industry Association. In 2003 established his own carved lacquerware studio and workshop. In 2005 Wen was named Master Craftsman of Chinese Arts and Crafts. In 2006 lacquerware carving was included in the First National Intangible Heritage Exhibition among other Chinese traditional arts that are in danger of disappearing from Chinese culture. In 2007 Wen was named the first national representative for the Preservation and Continuation of Cultural Heritage in the Fine Arts Program, which ensures that knowledge of lacquer carving will be passed down to the next generation. In 2009 the Beijing Arts and Crafts Association, the Beijing Folk Artists Association, Beijing Toy Association acknowledged Wen Qiangang for his innovation in carved lacquer design, agreeing that the new style of lacquer carving Wen has created shall be officially named “Wen-style *tihong*”. The following year Wen Qiangang became a visiting fellow at the Arts and Crafts Institute of the China Academy of Art.

Chapter One

The History and Culture of Carved Lacquerware

Section 1: All I Know about the History of Carved Lacquerware

Carved lacquerware is an important genre of traditional lacquerware in China. Inferring from the lacquer pieces found to date, the history of traditional Chinese lacquerware dates back to at least 7,000 years ago. The lacquered wooden bowl, unearthed from Hemudu Site, Yuyao, Zhejiang Province, has witnessed this long history. Much of my understanding of carved lacquerware comes from the book *Xiu Shi Lu (A Record of Lacquering Decoration)*, which is the only remaining ancient book on the craft of lacquering. Traditional Chinese lacquerware varies in types and methods. Here, I would like to categorize the artistry of lacquerware into two kinds. The first category is flat surfaced kind, which includes



Red-lacquered Wooden Bowl, unearthed from Hemudu Site in 1977, is the oldest lacquerware found to date in China.

inlaying, flat grinding and painting; the second category is embossed kind, which carved lacquerware belongs to. Clear¹ lacquer is made from lacquer and tung oil, and then painted layer by layer on a wooden or metal piece, such as a plate, that serves as the core of the lacquerware piece. When the lacquer is a certain thickness, carving is done to endow the ware with its artistic value. Lacquerware comes in several different colors. Red lacquerware is called *tihong* (red lacquer) and black is *tihei* (black lacquer). There is also carved lacquerware in green (*tilu*), yellow (*tihuang*), multi-colored (*tikai*), and white and black (*tixi*).



Xiu Shi Lu (A Record of Lacquering Decoration), written by Huang Cheng from Pingsha County, Xin'an City, Anhui Province in the Period of Longqing in the Ming Dynasty (1567-1572). It is the only remaining ancient book on the craft of lacquering.



Tihong, Plate with Narcissus Pattern, the Yuan Dynasty.

¹Clear lacquer is actually a kind of lacquer without any color used in lacquerware.



Tihei, Plate with Peony Pattern, the Yuan Dynasty.



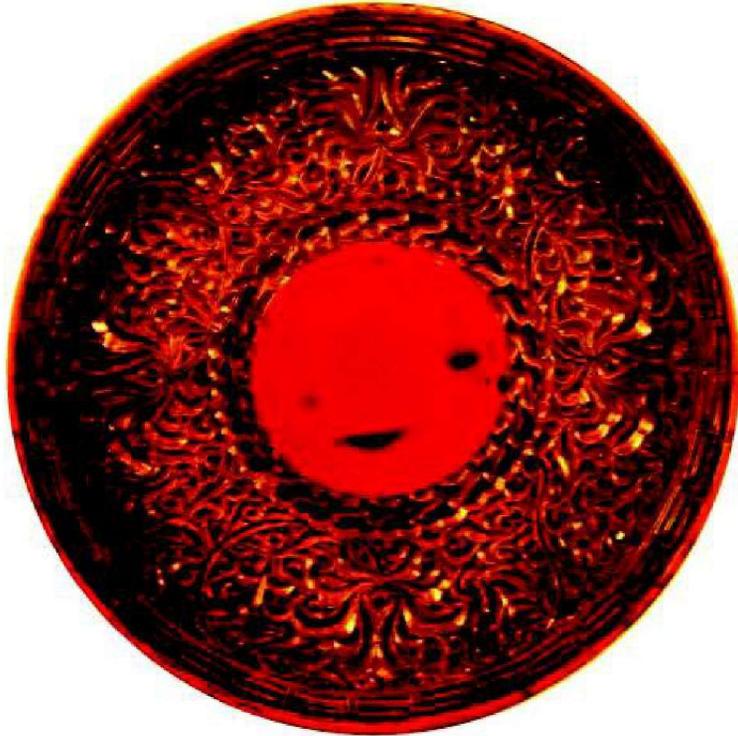
Ti Huang, Plate with a Dragon Wandering in the Clouds, the Ming Dynasty.



Ticai, Plate with Two Dragons Playing a Ball, the Ming Dynasty.



Tixi, A Round Plate, the Yuan Dynasty.



A compound-color piece from the Song Dynasty.

Let me introduce *tihong* first. *Tihong*, is the most important type of carved lacquerware and is often used to refer to all kinds of carved lacquerware. Why is *tihong* the representative of carved lacquerware? The first reason is its color. In ancient times, red was the symbol for fortune and social status. But now we use chemical colors, which all cost the same, so it is hard for us to fully understand the meaning of red in ancient times. At that time, red was mainly obtained from natural plants and ores. Most of the red for lacquerware was from cinnabar, which was grinded into powder and mixed with lacquer. However, not just any type of cinnabar was used to create the beautiful red in *tihong*. Only brightest and reddest cinnabar, which common people could not afford, could produce the correct color for *tihong*. That's why from the Song Dynasty there are *tihong* pieces with gold or silver at their center, but no *tihei* or *tilu* made with gold or silver. Compared to the cost of this color red cinnabar, the gold and silver dishware used as the core of *tihong* cost almost nothing.



Natural Cinnabar



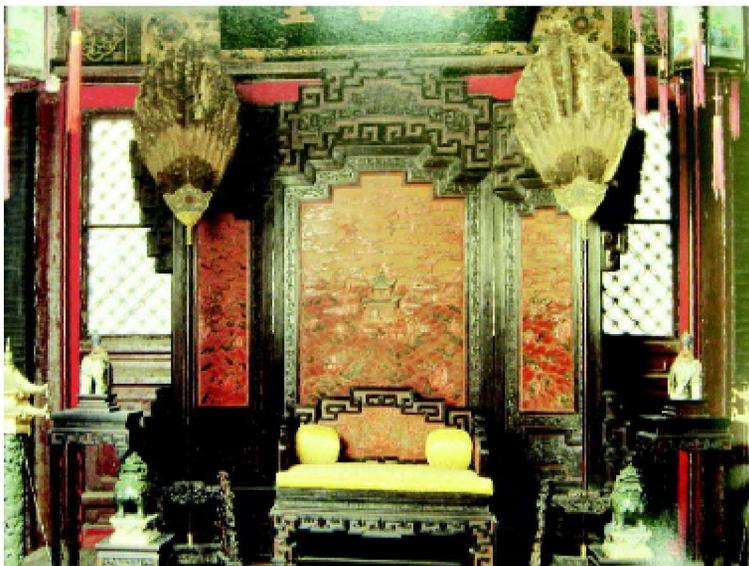
Vermilion

Following the reign of Emperor Yongle in the Ming Dynasty, *tihong* became popular. Apart from being the emperor's favorite, there is another important reason: the emergence of manmade cinnabar (vermilion). With vermilion widely used in *tihong*, the cost of red lacquerware decreased slightly, but was still expensive. Owning an entire set of red carved lacquerware was a display of wealth. If a piece of lacquerware was thick with many layers of red lacquer, it was considered very exquisite. Therefore I say using cinnabar and vermilion for *tihong* is not only a matter of color, but also has something to do with the historical background.

Tihong is an important part of carved lacquerware. Is it because red is the favorite color of the Chinese people? I don't think so. Actually many countries and nations love red, the Chinese in particular. Red is quite striking, enthusiastic and soul-stirring. So *tihong*¹ is always beautiful and eye-catching when displayed in a room. Not only does it look nice itself, it also makes other things more beautiful. With a *tihong* ware in a room, the whole space comes to life.

The red in *tihong* has many good qualities. Unlike the modern red made from chemicals, whose color not last long, the red from cinnabar and vermilion is quite durable and does not fade easily. Other colors such as Prussian Blue, Indian Red and the blue in the blue-and-white lacquerware, have

1. *Tihong* means red lacquerware, so we don't say *tihong* lacquerware.



The Carved Lacquered Screen in Chongzheng Hall of the Forbidden City

the same qualities: natural, nice, of good quality and cannot be produced by synthetic materials.

Another reason for the popularity of *tihong* pieces is that the techniques used in crafting *tihong* are used in almost all of the other types including *tihuang*, *tihei* and *tikai*. They share the same craft.

Red and black are the two main colors in traditional Chinese lacquer; *tihei* was popular as well in history. The lacquer, if not mixed with other things, becomes a warm black after it dries. If you want the color to be darker, you can add some ash to it. Thus black is much cheaper. There are many different types of *tihei* lacquerware pieces from history, including some pieces where the base layer of lacquer is a different color, such as green, red and yellow. Another technique used is filling grooves and lines in *tihei* with a different colored lacquer, like green, red or yellow, making veins of color in the black lacquer. There is also a kind of lacquerware where the colors of the base and vein lacquer are both black. Some people may prefer



Tihei, Plate of the Red Cliff Fugue, the Song Dynasty.



Tihei, Peony Pattern, the late Yuan Dynasty and the early Ming Dynasty.



Tihei, A Round Box, the Ming Dynasty.

tihei for its simplicity and elegance. Since the Ming Dynasty, *tihei* has been less popular than *tihong*, which requires the same amount of labor but is often sold at a much higher price. Carved lacquerware is of the upper class in various lacquerware, with *tihong* as the most precious and valuable kind in its class. Therefore, *tihong* enjoys a high popularity while other types are less favored.

Tixi is different from *tihong* in its crafting technique and method. According to Mr. Wang Shixiang, there are fourteen major types of lacquer crafts, among which *tixi* and *tihong* belong to carved lacquer.



Tixi, A Round Box, the Yuan Dynasty.



Tixi, A Pomander, the Yuan Dynasty.



Tixi, A Tea Tray, the Ming Dynasty.

Ticai (multi-colored lacquer) pieces, produced during the time of Emperor Xuande in the Ming Dynasty, are very beautiful. Patterns of red flowers, green leaves, yellow fruits and black stones present a colorful lacquerware, more gorgeous than the single-colored carved lacquerware.

I have to say something about this *ticai* box, *Two Orioles in a Chinese Pearleaf Crabapple Tree*. Just take a look at the appearance and you can tell the uniqueness in its creation and craft. The mastering of colors depends on the artist's feeling and can never be duplicated. Therefore, this masterpiece is the one and only like it in history.



Ticai, Peach-shape Box with the Pattern of Elder Zhang Guolao Crossing the Sea, the Qing Dynasty.



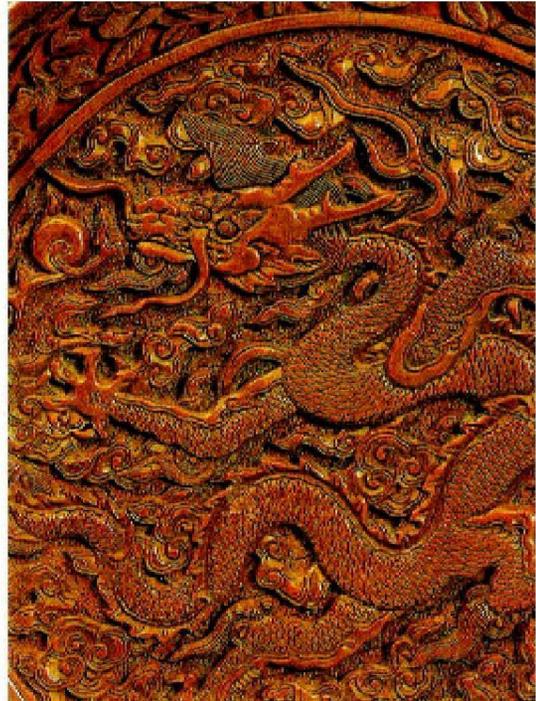
Ticai, Box of Two Orioles in a Chinese Pear-leaf Crabapple Tree, the Ming Dynasty.

There were not many *tilu* (green lacquer) pieces in history. Green is made from mixing the lacquer with the juice of *Sagina japonica* (a kind of plant). In the Wei-Jin Period, there was once a preference for green carved lacquerware. But since then, *tilu* has not been very popular.

Some experts regard carved lacquerware as the representative of traditional Chinese lacquer. Why? Firstly, to emboss on lacquer, which is originally liquid, requires a profound base of knowledge of the culture behind each lacquer piece and technique behind the craft. Secondly, carving lacquerware is very labor intensive. Since carved lacquerware was created for the use of the imperial family, one of the most important kinds of carved lacquerware is the Emperor's seat. Even Louis XIV never possessed such a gorgeous and solemn seat. Like all products official lacquerware pieces, carved lacquerware requires refinement of skill and perfection both in design and craft.



Tihuang, Case with Pattern of Chrysanthemum and Egret, the Ming Dynasty.



The *tihuang* dragon pattern and the *tihong* dragon pattern, from the Ming Dynasty.