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From East to West and Back Again: A critical review of the cross-cultural
consumption, collecting and historiography of Chinese ‘classic’ furniture from the Ming
and early Qing dynasties

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

School of Culture and Creative Arts

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ABSTRACT

Chinese hardwood furniture enjoyed a renaissance during the twentieth century that saw furniture objects become an important part of national, public and private collections. Desirability among collectors and connoisseurs continues to increase as the significance and appreciation for classical Chinese furniture intensifies. Whilst the prominence and popularity of refined Chinese hardwood furniture has risen with alacrity, the art-historical discourse as it is understood both outside and within China was principally constructed through historiography formed in books on the subject published by Western writers during the first half of the twentieth century.

This thesis documents the cultural consumption, appreciation and collection of furniture made during the Ming and early Qing dynasties, between 1368 and 1735; a period described as the apex of Chinese furniture production. The research addresses the historiography and collecting of classic Chinese furniture, commencing in Europe and China in the 1920s and 30s when furniture from China for domestic use became of interest to Western collectors and scholars alike, with reference to the interpretation and consumption of furniture at the time of its making. The early Western pioneers of Chinese furniture were fundamental in disseminating a taste for elegant and deceptively simple Chinese furniture which placed it on a global platform and elevated furniture from fine craft to art object.

Despite its significance, the collecting and literature of Chinese historic furniture has not been subject to comprehensive academic review and remains to be critically examined in its entirety from historiographical and a theoretical perspective. The thesis systemises the activities of individual art historians, collectors and art market participants to provide an analytical and observational study of the development of Chinese furniture collecting and its accompanying literature. Analysis of the literary materials provides clarification and understanding of the development of the cultural history of classic Chinese furniture. To facilitate comparison with the social, visual and experiential perception of classic Chinese furniture as it was understood at the time of its production, the study will consider and cross-reference primary textual and visual evidence from the Ming and Qing dynasties with 20th Century and later literature on Chinese furniture. This overarching review of the historiography and sources relating to Chinese classic furniture may also shed light on widely held presumptions regarding the materials and presentation of classic Chinese furniture, including the importance and knowledge of particular wood types which have informed appreciation and collecting practices.

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On a more personal note, to my daughter Emilia: thank you for your fortitude and patience. I hope we can inspire you to value your cultural heritage and perhaps one day to choose an academic path. A final note of thanks to my husband for constant support, humour and encouragement during long evenings.

ABBREVIATIONS, TERMINOLOGY AND USE OF LANGUAGE

Abbreviations

AAA	Archives of American Art
JCCFS	Journal of the Classical Chinese Furniture Society
LACMA	Los Angeles County Museum of Art
MIA	Minneapolis Institute of Art
MMA	Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York)
NAMA	Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art (Kansas City)
n.d.	No dates (dates unavailable or unknown)
PRC	People's Republic of China
PUMC	Peking Union Medical College
SRCA	Society for Research in Chinese Architecture
V&A	Victoria and Albert Museum
Wenwu	<i>Wenwu chubanshe</i> 文物出版社 (Cultural Relics Publishing House)

A note on terminology

The use of the word “classic” or “classical” to describe Chinese furniture signifies the enduring use of traditional models. As described in the Introduction, this designation has been widely adopted as a naming convention to label a particular category of hardwood furniture which subscribes to an aesthetic associated with furniture constructed in the Ming and early Qing dynasty.

In the context of this thesis, the use of “classic” and “classical” are regarded as equivalent and interchangeable. Experts on Chinese furniture have tended to select either term for use. For example, the writer Sarah Handler whose work is referenced herein uses the term “classical”; whereas Chinese academic Wang Shixiang used the word “classic”. For consistency the word “classical” is used throughout this thesis other than in quotations where “classic” is more appropriate to the original reference. References to this category of furniture are also described as “Chinese hardwood Ming and early Qing dynasty furniture” or “hardwood Ming style furniture”.

Geographical references

East Asian art refers to art made in Japan, China, Taiwan, Mongolia and North and South Korea. It is used here to define geographic region of origination. References to “pan Asian” art denote art from all parts of Asia, including East Asia, the Indian subcontinent and South-East Asia. The terms “West” and “Western” are used in reference to Europe and North America, collectively.

Transliteration

In romanisation of Chinese characters, pinyin has been used throughout except where the original text appears in Wade-Giles and is more appropriate for reproduction in quotations.

Chinese text

Simplified Chinese characters have been used except where the use of traditional characters provides a more accurate representation of the original source material either in quotations or in title references.

Translations

All translations from original Chinese text are by Helena and Alan Fung unless otherwise attributed. Non-Chinese translations are by the author unless otherwise attributed.

INTRODUCTION

Things are what we encounter, ideas are what we project...
The aesthetic object is not one that can be accurately defined in
any possible terms of description or measurement.¹

Leo Stein, *The A-B-C of Aesthetics*, 1927

1. Principal research questions and significance

This thesis takes as its subject the historiography of Chinese hardwood furniture, propagated across variant cultural dimensions and channels and its coaction with related collecting practices relevant to an acquisitive culture and questions relevant to the formation of ideas and concepts related to the transfer of objects between cultures. As art historian Sarah Handler has commented, “The concept of Chinese classical furniture is a twentieth century phenomenon.”² Handler’s statement acknowledges that the concept of Chinese classical furniture was shaped asynchronously with the production of these objects in the Ming and early Qing dynasties but veils the fact that the proposition was formed by non-indigenous connoisseurs and collectors, based on a selective contemporary Western aesthetic.

The principal research questions focus on the effects of cross-cultural exchange, particularly regarding the return of collected objects and their transformation into carriers of extended narratives. The transfer and reinterpretation of objects within a revised cultural context are foundational to the study of historiography and the collecting of Chinese and ethnographic artifacts. Central to these inquiries is an examination of how art is perceived differently between originating and acquisitive cultures, particularly in light of value concepts created in the context of an internationalised art market. This is particularly relevant when objects flow back to their cultures of origin, validated and recontextualized to carry new narratives and meanings.

¹ Leo Stein. 1927. *The A-B-C of Aesthetics*. New York: Boni & Liveright. 44-45. Accessed 23 May 2024. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uva.x000961083&seq=72>.

² Sarah Handler. 2001. *Austere Luminosity of Chinese Classical Furniture*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 3.

The research and analysis presented in the chapters that follow stems from a desire to identify the process by which ideas relative to value, artistic and aesthetic preference and discrimination between objects of a similar type are formed. This analysis considers both the macro effect sociopolitical and economic forces and the contribution of individual actors including collectors, critics, curators and writers. Taking Chinese Ming and early Qing hardwood furniture as the focus of this critique, I follow the trajectory of comprehension and convocation of facts relevant to a previously obscure class of objects and their elevation to the field of art through the synchronous cultivation of historiography and collecting practice. This process includes the establishment of definitions intrinsic to the originating society and interpretation and classification by a hegemonic receiving culture.

In addition, I analyse the relationship between the written historiography and the selection, consumption and display of Chinese furniture through related public and private collecting practices. In light of its relative newness as a field of art historical interest, a study of the coaction between historiography and collecting of Chinese furniture presents an opportunity to delineate the significance of the written history to the ascription of value and artistic significance through the inception, formation and circulation of fluid perceptions of taste and meaning that occurs when objects traverse cultures and chronology. As Leo Stein commented “The future is almost entirely a remembered thing. It is constructed and not found.”³ This analysis of historiographical and collecting events is anchored by a theoretical framework which draws from the fields of anthropology and sociology, examining the crucible through which contemporary ideas fuse with historical concepts.

Through the application of theoretical contextualisation, the examination of the written historiography of art and the role of dominant authors is grounded in reference to contemporary sociopolitical stimuli and examination of cultural antecedents of individual authors which impacted the interpretation of their subject matter and ensuing representation of the history of furniture objects. The art historical analysis of objects typically involves study of the creator and his milieu with the artist-protagonist as both genius creator and entrepreneurial manipulator of contemporary circumstance and beneficiary of an environment conducive to the timely reception of his artistic output. In this thesis I examine the process of value creation, the ascent in esteem of a work of art and the establishment of a receptive market requiring interconnection and exchange between the spheres of culture, commerce and academia. In this schema, historiography itself represents a cultural product signifying the status of accumulated knowledge and articulating current ideologies

³ Stein, *Aesthetics*, 57.

representative of the writer's own experience and the environment in which the creation takes place. According to the social theorist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) whose work I draw on at multiple junctures:

For the author, the critic, the art dealer, the publisher or the theatre manager, the only legitimate accumulation consists in making a name for oneself, a known, recognized name, a capital of consecration implying a power to consecrate objects (with a trademark or signature) or persons (through publication, exhibition, etc.) and therefore to give value.⁴

I argue that the reception and selection of objects and their “consecration” (applying Bourdieu’s terminology) through the conveyance of ideas substantiating their reification and consequent commodification is of equal significance in the formation of artistic concepts as the original inception and execution of the artefact. In the case of Chinese classical furniture, the formation of a historiography of the genre was instrumental in the elevation of a specific class of objects possessing the characteristics which I describe above to the status of art. The act of collecting, identifying, separating and selecting and labelling furniture pieces based on a recognisable set of characteristics and desirable attributes precipitated the formation of the historiography of Chinese classical furniture. As James S. Ackerman writes, “the historian, like the artist, exercises his taste and applies his acquired schemata in selecting his subject, in choosing certain facts from an infinitely large pool, and in formulating them into what we significantly call a “picture” of the past. This picture, like its counterpart in the museum, has a definite style, and may be identified as characteristic of a certain time, place, and author.”⁵

2. Constructing a globalised art historical narrative for Chinese furniture

The classification and documentation of a history of classical Chinese furniture was the work of a small number of academics and writers whose incremental contribution to the expansion of knowledge on the subject from the early part of twentieth century is considered

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods” in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson. 1993. New York: Columbia University Press. 75.

⁵ James S. Ackerman. “Art History and the Problems of Criticism.” *Daedalus* 89, no. 1 (1960): 253-63. Accessed 25 May 2023. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20026565>. 254.

here in detail together with contextual catechisms for their research and the effect of wider social and political events. The sociopolitical environment of China and Beijing, in particular in the decades between the end of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) in 1911 and the start of second Sino-Japanese war (1937-45) in 1937, augmented the presence of Western delegations and expatriate residents in China, escalating cross-cultural discourse and knowledge exchange. The presence of foreigners in Beijing in the early twentieth century had a relatively short history dating from the end of the Second Opium War and the signing of the Convention of Peking in 1860 which permitted the founding of diplomatic quarters in the city.

Prior to the establishment of the diplomatic legations, foreigners in China had largely been confined to the foreign concessions of Guangdong and leased territories, notably Hong Kong, Canton and Shanghai.⁶ Accounts of Beijing in the early twentieth century describe a city distinct from Shanghai's European designed streets which retained an authentic, archaic charm and presented novel possibilities for a group of foreigners seeking to experience the unfamiliar. Xusheng Huang has noted that despite the high level of contact between "colonizers and the colonized" which occurred even within the foreign legations, in actuality fewer than 1,000 Western expatriates lived in Beijing outside the legation quarters in the early twentieth century.⁷ Whilst the collecting of Chinese furniture extended to diplomats and expatriates within the legation quarter, frequently high ranking administrative or medical personnel, most of the early Western authors on Chinese furniture chose to immerse themselves in Chinese culture, often living in traditional courtyard houses near the Forbidden City, driven by a sense of the romantic and often by impecunious financial circumstances.

Use of the term "Western" and its derivatives are in this sense intended to convey both European and American tendencies, although William McNeill has pointed out that the set of values conveyed by references to "the West" may be interpreted as encompassing non-Western but developed territories such as Australia and even Japan which have adopted particular social structures and methods.⁸ As McNeill argues, the concept of "the West" results from a prolonged period of historical fluctuation and reinvention and may be defined and interpreted fluidly depending on the location and nexus of the context in which it used and received. References to "the West" in this thesis are typically employed to denote a

⁶ Xusheng Huang, "The Transfer of Foreign Modernity in Beijing: The New Urban Space in the Legation Quarter, 1900-1928," *Urban History* 51, no. 1 (2024): 171-97.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926822000359>.

⁷ Huang, "The Transfer of Foreign Modernity," 176, 194.

⁸ William H. McNeill. 1997. "What we Mean by the West." *Orbis* (Philadelphia) 41 (4): 513-524.
[/https://go.exlibris.link/P5BywZbV](https://go.exlibris.link/P5BywZbV).

geographical space largely encompassing Europe and North America (including Canada) and extending to Australia. The existence of a conceptualised “West” necessitates juxtaposition with an Eastern experience and ideal. As I show in the course of this thesis, which is organised chronologically and geographically, the delta between these two worlds increasingly narrowed during a period of escalating globalisation. Although many of the Western historical figures, collectors and authors whose work is highlighted here are associated with North America, the influence of European thought and design approaches took root in America and extended to former European colonies such as Australia.

A chronological survey of the historiography begins with an examination of the precedent literature on Chinese furniture as a broad category from the inception of the Western literature in the 1920s and acknowledgement of historical source material dating to the time of Marco Polo. This is followed by the evolution of literature on Chinese ‘classic’ hardwood furniture and identification of a differentiated aesthetic meeting the characteristics of this evolved designation dates from the publication of *Chinese Domestic Furniture* in 1944 by Gustav Ecke (1896-1971).⁹ Ecke was a German academic whose research in Chinese art history spanned architecture, painting, bronzes and sculpture. He moved from Bonn to Amoy (now Xiamen) in 1923 to teach at Amoy University, opened in 1923 as part of a programme to increase the number of institutions of higher education in China with a focus on advancing the quality and level of tertiary education in China.¹⁰ After leaving Amoy (Xiamen) in 1928, Ecke spent five years at Tsinghua University before moving to Fu Jen University, both located in Beijing.¹¹ In 1945 Ecke married Betty Tseng Yu-ho 曾佑和 (1925-2017), a classically trained artist from a scholarly Qing family. A photograph from the period shows Ecke and Tseng Yu-ho both dressed in Chinese robes and seated on a Ming-style hardwood couch. (Figure 1) The same couch is further illustrated in detail in photographs and line drawings in *Chinese Domestic Furniture*. (Figure 2) This image of Ecke, together with the quarter century period for which he remained in China and his role as a founder of the periodical *Monumenta Serica* (“Chinese Relics”) stand as evidence of his deep appreciation of East Asian culture.¹² Ecke departed China in 1948 after the second

⁹ Gustav Ecke. 1962. *Chinese Domestic Furniture*. Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle Company. Originally published 1944.

¹⁰ Dates and biographical information from Pierre Jaquillard, “In Memoriam: Gustav Ecke 1896-1971,” *Artibus Asiae* 34, no. 2/3 (1972): 115-18, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3249643>.

¹¹ See Chia Feng Young, “Higher Education in China,” *Peabody Journal of Education* 14, no. 4 (1937): 185-95. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1487913>.

¹² According to the publisher’s website, *Monumenta Serica*, founded in 1935, translates from the Latin to “Chinese Relics” or “Records of Chinese culture.” See <https://www.monumenta-serica.de/monumenta-serica/institute/history/index.php>.

Sino-Japanese War, relocating to Honolulu where he worked first as Curator of Chinese Art at the Academy of Arts (in 1950) and then as Professor of Arts at Honolulu University.

Chinese Domestic Furniture, first published in Beijing by the French bookseller and publisher Henri Vetch (1898-1978) represents Ecke's most significant literary contribution to the historiography of Chinese furniture.¹³ Although the first edition of *Chinese Domestic Furniture* was limited in number, accounts of the French bookstore which Vetch ran in the Grand Hotel in Beijing, indicate that his engagement in the publication was decisive in its successful reception and distribution. Vetch's obituary written by British diplomat J.F. Ford (n.d.) attested to his pivotal position as cultural arbiter among the European delegation in Beijing and significance as a publisher, noting that many of the books he published became classics, suggesting his involvement was accessory to the positive reception of *Chinese Domestic Furniture*.¹⁴

As I describe in the first chapter, the publication of *Chinese Domestic Furniture* was critical both as the first internationally recognised monograph to take Chinese hardwood furniture as its sole focus and for its articulation of a singular aesthetic through the selection of furniture acquired by Ecke and others during their sojourn in Beijing which Ecke chose to group together for inclusion in the book. Although Ecke had published two earlier articles on Chinese furniture (including one on Chinese cabinet woods), the available evidence suggests that the book was written over a number of years and resulted from dialogue between Ecke and his associates, friends and compatriots in Beijing. Its publication recorded both Ecke's personal collection and those of his companions and peers in China, exemplifying the practical relationship between the formation of collections, the selection and acquisition of objects and written historiography.

The following addition to the historiography of Chinese furniture, *Chinese Household Furniture*, published four years later in 1948, was authored by George Norbert Kates (1895-1990), an American who lived in Beijing between 1933-1941.¹⁵ *Chinese Household Furniture* similarly depicted the social and cultural lives of Kates and his group of expatriate associates in Beijing who opportunistically collected Chinese furniture to furnish their residences, typically as in Kates' example, traditional courtyard houses beyond the legation perimeter. Kates moved within a bohemian social circle of aesthetes and art

¹³ Ecke also published monographs on painting and bronzes including *Chinese Paintings in Hawaii*, published in 1965 by the Honolulu Academy of Arts and monographs on significant collections of Chinese bronzes. A complete list of Ecke's publications are in Jaquillard, *In Memoriam*, 117.

¹⁴ For bibliographical information on Henri Vetch, see Percival Spear and J. F. Ford, "Obituaries: Henri Vetch," *Asian Affairs* 10, no. 1 (1979): 113-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068377908729929>.

¹⁵ George Kates. 1948. *Chinese Household Furniture*. New York: Harper and Brothers.

historians including Sir Edmund Backhouse (1873-1944), Harold Acton (1904-1994) and the curator Laurence Sickman (1907-1988) who would later establish the first American permanent public collection of Chinese Ming and Qing hardwood furniture in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art (NAMA) in Kansas. Caroline Francis Bieber (1886-1983) a British heiress, collector and dealer in minor and applied Chinese arts appears to have been at the centre of this circle. Scant records of Bieber's life indicate that she arrived in Beijing during the 1920s and relocated to America in 1941 where she later donated her collections of belt toggles and textiles to the Field Museum in Chicago in 1962. Bieber is variously described as both a wealthy expatriate socialite and an art dealer specialising in textiles and folk arts.¹⁶ Archival records in the NAMA and the Field Museum show that Bieber also opportunistically bought and sold cultural artefacts to museums and collectors, including supplying Laurence Sickman who was retained by the NAMA in 1931 as buying agent in Beijing and from 1935 as curator of oriental art in Kansas City.¹⁷

As with Ecke's book, *Chinese Household Furniture* provided a photographic record or snapshot of the furniture collected by this group of expatriate residents and their associates in Beijing during the period. It is evident that Kates, the designated author whose name is immutably associated with the book, neither originated, incepted or executed the compilation of objects that form the basis of the collection of furniture objects gathered for the purpose. The book began as a photographic project between three women, including Kates' sister Beatrice Kates (1899-1977). The two other female inceptors of the project were Bieber and Hedda Hammer Morrison (1908-1991) a German photographer employed to manage Hartung's Photo Shop, which was at that time the main photography studio in the legation quarter. Morrison later took a commission working for Bieber where she photographed and recorded handcrafted items collected by Bieber and worked alongside Bieber and Beatrice Kates to photograph selected pieces of Chinese hardwood furniture owned by friends and contacts in Beijing.¹⁸ At Bieber's request Kates wrote the introduction to *Chinese Household Furniture* in 1948 during his short-lived tenure as Curator of Oriental Art, a post he held from 1947-1949 at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, and which he assumed after mounting an exhibition of Chinese furniture at the Museum in 1946. The second chapter of

¹⁶ Alastair Morrison. 1992. "Hedda Morrison in Peking: A Personal Recollection," *East Asian History*, no. 4 (1992): 105-118. ISSN (print): 1036-6008. www.eastasianhistory.org/sites/default/files/article-content/04/EAH04_04.pdf.

¹⁷ Extensive archival material records Bieber's correspondence with Laurence Sickman at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art and Kenneth Starr at the Field Museum in Chicago.

¹⁸ Claire Roberts has detailed Hedda Morrison's time in China and describes Hartung's as one of a small number of foreign-owned photography shops inside the legation quarter. Claire Roberts. 1993. *In Her View: The Photographs of Hedda Morrison in China and Sarawak 1933-67*. Sydney, NSW: Powerhouse Publishing, Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences.

this thesis provides a synoptic critique of items included in *Chinese Domestic Furniture* and *Chinese Household Furniture*, noting that many of Ecke's own collected pieces of furniture were included in both publications.

Subsequent additions to Western historiography on Chinese furniture include articles and monographs by Walter Perceval Yetts (1878-1957), John Calvin Ferguson (1866-1945), C. P. Fitzgerald (1902-1992) and Louise Hawley Stone (1904-1997). Whilst on an individual basis these works represented relatively minor additions to the available literature on the subject matter; collectively they began to address the particularities of Chinese hardwood furniture from an anthropological and cultural perspective. Fitzgerald and Stone, in their books *Barbarian Beds* and *The Chair in China*, published in 1952 and 1965 respectively, attempted to chart the development and nexus of import for the folding stool and the progression in Chinese culture to use of the backed chair.¹⁹ Both endeavoured to situate Chinese furniture within a sequential Western art historical logic and narrative, examining the intimate connection between furniture objects in use and social practice and custom. The quest to identify when China moved from “mat level” seating to higher-level seated furniture as in the West presupposed an implicit comparison of the literal elevation of Chinese societal practice over time towards equivalence with European cultural practices. Analysis of these anthropologically oriented, art historicizing texts provides tacit insight into prevalent attitudes towards China and to the disposition and preconceptions of specific authors, as well as the limitations of knowledge that prevailed on the subject matter during this period. Stone, for example, noted in her introduction that not only were there few examples of ancient furniture in China due to destruction and natural disasters, but also that any pieces that might have been recovered during archaeological excavations had likely been mishandled and were no longer extant.²⁰

As Chinese classical furniture established in status as a collectable field of art, a separate class of literature dealer-derived and academic literature emerged from the 1970s, led by dealers such as Robert Hatfield Ellsworth (1929-1914) and Grace Wu Bruce (b.1949). Written works by Craig Clunas and Sarah Handler dating from the 1980s onwards present the major Western academic works in this space. Referencing the theories of Susan Pearce, and others on the role of art institutions, the second chapter of this thesis addresses the interrelationships and co-dependencies between the academic and commercial art spheres in

¹⁹ Louise Hawley Stone. 1952. *The Chair in China*. Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum of Archaeology. C. P. Fitzgerald. 1965. *Barbarian Beds; the Origin of the Chair in China*. South Brunswick N.J: A.S. Barnes, 1965.

¹⁹ Stone, *The Chair in China*, ix.

the establishment of art fields and perpetuation and escalation of knowledge through the historiography derived from both groups. Characteristic of both the academic and commercial art historiographical spheres is an intrinsic and interdependent association with private and public museum collections: *Chinese Furniture*, for example, was written by Clunas in his capacity as a curator at the Victoria and Albert (“V&A”) Museum in London and features many of the pieces of Chinese furniture in the museum’s collection.²¹ Similarly, the work of dealer-connoisseurs such as Bruce and Ellsworth typically focused on the analysis and promotion of a single collection. Handler’s doctoral thesis, submitted in 1982 to the University of Kansas, examined in detail the Chinese furniture collections in the NAMA in Kansas City. Her intimate knowledge of this collection is interwoven in both of her principal contributions to the art historiography, alongside evidence from other collections in American public museums.²²

The combination of dealer and academic literature authored from the 1970s onward coincided with a change in tenor of US and China political relationships and establishment of the so-called “Open Door” policy (门户开放政策, *Menhu kaifang zhengce*), commencing a process of economic and market reforms and “opening up” to the West. The normalisation of diplomatic relations between China and the US began in the early 1970s with National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger’s (1923-2023) diplomatic visits to China in 1971 and US President Richard Nixon’s (1913-1994) tour of China and meetings with the founder of the People’s Republic of China (“PRC”), Mao Zedong 毛泽东 (1893-1976) and Premier Zhou Enlai 周恩来 (1898-1976) in 1972. China’s decisive economic reforms commenced in 1978 under Deng Xiaoping’s 邓小平 (1904-1997) market policies promoting international trade and an entrepreneurial domestic business environment.

The economic opening of China consequentially promoted increased cross-cultural exchange and dialogue between China and the West and resulted in the expansion of the Chinese art market and global circulation and availability of Chinese art objects. A little-known pamphlet, *Zhongguo Mingdai shinei zhuangshi he jiaju* 中国明代室内装饰和家具 (Chinese Interior Decoration and Furniture of Ming Dynasty) authored by Professor Yang Yao 杨耀 (1902-1978) and issued by Peking University in 1942 predates *Chinese Domestic Furniture* and represents the first publication in any language solely focused on hardwood

²¹ Craig Clunas. 1988. *Chinese Furniture*. London, UK: Bamboo Publishing Limited.

²² Sarah Handler, *Pieces in Context: An Approach to the Study of Chinese Furniture Through an Analysis of Ming Dynasty Domestic Hardwood Examples in Kansas City*. Ph. D dissertation, University of Kansas, 1982 Original printed copy referenced.

furniture.²³ Despite this, the number of monographs and articles on Chinese furniture published in China remained limited until the 1980s when, spurred in part by economic emancipation, Chinese authors led by Wang Shixiang 王世襄 (1911-2009) began to shape a Chinese response to the Western literature on indigenous furniture of the Ming and early Qing dynasties.

Wang's unique perspectives, informed by a combination of personal agency, idiosyncratic and multi-disciplinary research methods and access to original archival and literary materials (including through his occupation as a researcher at the Palace Museum, Beijing) informed and accelerated collecting practices, art historical study and the formation of a Chinese narrative on the country's furniture history. As discussed in the third chapter of this thesis, the ideals and principles expressed in Wang's books and articles remained consistent with aesthetic principles defined by Ecke approximately fifty years previously in *Chinese Domestic Furniture*.

Renewed diplomatic and trade relationships with the West and economic systems of reform also promoted exchange between Western and Chinese writers and fomented a cross-cultural dialogue engendering further transmission of knowledge, ideas and perceptions on Chinese furniture. As Sheldon Lu has proposed in his book on globalisation and postmodernity in China, a symbiotic relationship existed between the transfer of capital and culture on a global stage furthered by a Chinese diaspora and by interchange between China and developed nations informed by writing, art exhibitions, journals and education.²⁴ The consequence of this dialogue in relation to Chinese furniture includes collaborative translations by Sarah Handler, Curtis Evarts and Lark Mason of Wang Shixiang's two monographs on Chinese furniture and a jointly authored monograph by Wang Shixiang and Curtis Evarts on the collection of the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture in Renaissance, California.²⁵ The publication of Wang Shixiang's first monograph on the subject matter in 1986 which was translated into English by Sarah Handler, featured examples of furniture pieces from public and private Chinese collections for the first time.

²³ See Yang Yao. 1986. *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu* 明式家具研究 (Research on Ming-style Furniture). Beijing: *Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe*. Yang's collected articles on Chinese furniture were compiled by his protégé and student Chen Zengbi 陈增弼 (1933-2006) into a collected volume and published in 1986 after his death in Yang's name. These works are considered in detail in the third chapter.

²⁴ Sheldon Lu. 2001. *China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.

²⁵ Curtis Evarts, Shixiang Wang, and Chinese Art Foundation. 1995. *Masterpieces from the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture*. Chicago: Chinese Art Foundation.

Although it was not until 2000 when Chen Mengjia 陈梦家 (1911-1966) and Wang Shixiang's furniture was acquired by the Shanghai Museum as part of its permanent collection that Chinese furniture was put on public display in a gallery context, in China an increasing number of publications in the final two decades of the twentieth century by Chinese authors demonstrate that altered economic and political circumstances in China provided an environment under which it could reclaim and further promote a global art historical narrative on its own tangible and artistic cultural heritage.²⁶ In evaluating the Chinese historiography on the subject in the last two decades of the twentieth century I address both the earlier foundations of a revival in interest and re-evaluation in traditional Chinese heritage, through the study of architecture, as a precursor for interest in Chinese furniture and to understand the interconnections between some of the key figures discussed in this thesis and their legacy for a subsequent generation of art collectors, dealers and historiographers.

3. Characteristics of Chinese classic furniture

Examining the art historian Max Loehr's (1903-1988) attempt to define the question of style in his seminal works on ancient Chinese bronzes, Robert Bagley has noted that the fundamental concept of characterising style in art history is both complex and "deeply entangled with unresolved problems in historiography."²⁷ Bagley offers a simple definition for the style of an object as an "ensemble of its physical properties" by reference to the properties of similar and often foregoing objects used by art historians to identify sequential and narrative logic in the facture of works of art.²⁸ In comparative terms, the principal stylistic attributes of Chinese 'classic' furniture of the Ming and early Qing dynasty are simplicity; the relative absence of superfluous ornamentation and elegant proportions which in combination articulated the status and superlative taste of the owner through the adoption of subtle design protocols.

The impact of the relaxation of the imperial sea ban (海禁, *haijin*) in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) and its expansionary effect on the Chinese economy concurrent with the growth of an urban population resulting in accelerative impact on artistic production, has

²⁶ As described in the final chapter, Chen Mengjia's furniture collection was sold by his wife's family to the Shanghai Museum; Wang Shixiang's collection was also acquired by the Museum.

²⁷ Robert Bagley. 2008. *Max Loehr and the Study of Chinese Bronzes: Style and Classification in the History of Art*. Ithaca: East Asia Program, Cornell University. 121.

²⁸ Bagley, *Max Loehr*, 121.

been examined by historians of material culture such as Craig Clunas and Jonathan Hay.²⁹ At the same time, the increased availability in the Ming dynasty of imported woods had a broader geopolitical significance, referenced in Wang Shixiang's citation of Zhou Qiyuan's commentary in the preface to *Dong xi yang kao* 东西洋考 (Studies on Countries to the East and West) which points to the abolition of the *haijin* by the Longqing Emperor (r.1567-1572) of the *haijin* which had restricted trade with foreign nations as a principle catalyst for the influx of imported goods.³⁰ By the late Ming dynasty, a burgeoning social class could afford to demonstrate their wealth and express identity through the creation of luxurious surroundings.

The use of rare and costly hardwoods and the achievement of balanced and harmonious forms prototypical of ancient designs in the Ming and early Qing dynasties served as a covert symbology recognisable to an educated or aspirational elite class. This style of furniture, later classified as a distinct grouping and awarded the designation 'classic' by twentieth century Western writers and collectors stands in contrast to both highly carved hardwood and lacquered imperial or "palace" furniture (Figure 3) produced for use by the emperor and with quotidian softwood furniture, presumed to have been used by the masses but which in actuality would have been found in the homes of people of all socio-demographics. The small recessed-leg table illustrated at Figure 4 is an example of a furniture item in lacquer which is in the "classical" style of which there are numerous examples constructed in plain hardwood. Although such examples such as this one in lacquered softwood are now rare, their existence demonstrates that this style of furniture was not only constructed in hardwood.

The significance of hardwoods in furniture collecting

A small number of important hardwoods, in some cases imported as tribute to the Ming emperors with other woods deriving from indigenous species, have come to characterise the desirability of a specific class of furniture venerated by modern collectors

²⁹ Jonathan Hay. 2010. *Sensuous Surfaces: The Decorative Object in Early Modern China*. London: Reaktion Books. 47.

³⁰ Referencing the proliferation of mercantile trade following the abolition of laws restricting trade with other jurisdictions. Quote and title translation from Wang Shixiang, *Classic Chinese Furniture of the Ming and Early Qing Dynasties*. 1986. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (HK) Co. Ltd. 15-16. The *Dong xi yang kao* is referenced related to the economic impact of the cessation of the *Haijin* to the Emperor's finances and the wider population. See Wang Shixiang 1990. *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture: Ming and early Qing dynasties*. Chicago, IL: Art Media Resources and Hong Kong: Joint Publishing (HK) Co Ltd. 6.

of Chinese furniture. The two principal types of cabinet woods which will be most frequently referenced in this study are *huanghuali* 黄花梨 and *zitan* 紫檀. In view of their rarity and expense, furniture items constructed in these woods are considered by collectors to be *prima facie* of the highest rank. As I articulate in the following chapters, knowledge of the origin and precise genus and species of both *huanghuali* and *zitan* is uncertain and based on an incremental process of the assimilation of fragmentary knowledge from colloquial and primary sources. The first reference to *huanghuali* is contained in the imperial Qing archives and relates to the construction of two wooden, gilded “Western” boxes, dated 1735 during the reign of Emperor Yongzhen 雍正帝 (r.1722-1735).³¹ The preference for particular cabinet woods from the Ming dynasty onwards is evidenced by texts of the period which sought to decode standards of good taste for a newly wealthy consumer class, such as those by Wen Zhenheng 文震亨 (1585-1645) and Li Yu 李漁 (1611-1680).³² However as I elaborate in the chapters that follow, reference to Ming source material does not substantiate the preference by modern collectors for *huanghuali* and *zitan* furniture.

The characteristic properties of these woods include an attractive multi-dimensional surface quality with wood cells providing a reflective foil-like sheen and a sufficiently dense structure both as a medium for delicate carving and to withstand China’s humid and variable climate. (Figure 5) *Huanghuali* is recognizable by a typified pattern of small burls which create an effect the Ming writer and aesthetician Cao Zhao 曹昭 (1368-1644) described as a “lovable demon face” pattern (其花有鬼面者可爱, *Qi hua you guimianzhe keai*) cited by Alan and Camille Fung in their comprehensive study on the origins of *huanghuali*.³³ (Figure 6) Two types of *huanghuali* have been identified: a highly prized, historic, variety from Hainan Island and a newer and more abundant variation from Vietnam. As discussed in detail

³² The primary texts authored by so-called Ming dynasty tastemakers are Wen Zhenheng’s *Zhangwu zhi* 長物志 (Treatise on Superfluous Things); Li Yu’s *Yijia yan jiushi qiwan bu* 一家言居室器玩部 (The section on useful and decorative objects for the dwelling) This section on household items described furniture of good taste and is extracted from Li Yu’s *Qian qing ou ji* 閑情偶寄 (Random thoughts on leisure). See Wen, Zhenheng. *The Elegant Life of the Chinese Literati from the Chinese Classic, Treatise on Superfluous Things: Finding Harmony and Joy in Everyday Objects*. Translated by Tony Blishen. Foreword: Craig Clunas. New York, NY: Better Link Press. 2019.

³³ Alan and Camille Fung, “Huanghuali,” *Journal of the Classical Furniture Society* 1, no. 4 (Autumn 1991): 41-45. Among the references cited, Cao, Zhao 曹昭. *Xinzege gu yao lun* 新增格古要論 (The Newly Expanded Essential Treatise on Antiquities). Wang Zuo 王佐 et al. eds. 1459. Chapter 8, p.6. The Chinese University of Hong Kong Library, V.3 online version: <https://repository.lib.cuhk.edu.hk/en/item/cuhk-421074#page/145/mode/2up> Accessed on 14 January 2024.

in the second chapter, modern writers on classical Chinese furniture largely omitted reference to lacquered furniture which continued to be produced alongside hardwood furniture for use in buildings of all types and socioeconomic orientation throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Whilst hardwoods such as *huali* 花梨, *hongmu* 红木; (the latter being a red wood, similar in appearance to *huanghuali* but considered a poorer secondary wood in terms of collecting value); *tielimu* 铁梨木 (*tieli* wood) and *jichimu* 鸚鵡木 (*jichi* wood) are considered to have been the preferred furniture construction materials of scholar officials, connoisseurs and *bon vivants* from the Ming dynasty, *zitan* was (at least in theory) received as foreign tribute to the Chinese emperor and reserved for use by the imperial family, its hard dense surfaces well suited to the sombre, elaborate carving that characterised palace furniture. (Figure 7) Ming and early Qing dynasty furniture signified sociocultural and financial status through a vocabulary of discreet visual ciphers including use of materials, subtle carved embellishments, harmony in proportion and adherence to enduring traditional styles. The specific elements which rendered *huanghuali* alluring to an elite audience bear similarity to those deemed critical to the more prestigious art of Chinese painting. This included an intrinsic connection to the natural world and a codification of surface pattern demonstrative of refined good taste on the part of both the patron and the beholder.

The substantive physical distinction between *huanghuali* and other woods such as *hongmu* and *lao huali* 老花梨 (old *huali*) is sufficiently fine as to render the identification of species and wood types almost indiscernible to non-experts and anyone other than experienced collector-connoisseurs, with the result that commercial dealers have attached the name to a variety of objects constructed in woods of similar appearance. For example, *lao huali* and *huanghuali* are in actuality distinguished by appearance, with *lao* (“old”) used to describe wood with a duller, more aged appearance which does not meet presentational standards for *huanghuali*. These distinctions evolved from aesthetic labels used by agents in the commercial sphere for wood types comparable to *huanghuali* but which lack some of the key attributes of this more prestigious and highly valued wood.

Interlocution with Modernist principles and aesthetics

As writers such as Sarah Handler have observed, the elevation of Chinese furniture to collectable commodity pursuant to acquisition by Western connoisseurs and collectors

resident in China during the first half of the twentieth century correlated with a tendency which took root in Weimar Germany towards modernist aesthetic principles and Bauhaus precepts.³⁴ The roots of the modernist aesthetic in architecture are considered by critics to reside in the late nineteenth century rejection of the Enlightenment which intensified in an era of aesthetic permutation convergent with fissures in the global sociopolitical and economic order coincident with transformational events such as the first World War in Europe (1914-1918); the Depression era in the United States (1929-1941); and the Spanish Civil war (1936-1939).³⁵ In addition, the rapid pace of industrialisation in Western economies advanced the search for differentiated philosophical perspectives expressive of an alternative social and cultural milieu, prompting a Western *avant-garde* to engage aesthetically with artefacts from autochthonous and less economically developed societies.

These shifts in taste and design reflected across collecting practices in Chinese art and extended to paintings and ceramics as well as furniture, with the former among the most highly appreciated and established form of East Asian collectables. Whereas established taste among Western collectors of Chinese ceramics at the dawn of the twentieth century included highly ornate, richly coloured and often grand pieces, by the mid-century the taste for Chinese porcelain embraced rare monochromatic Song dynasty glazed items such as *jun* 钧 and *ru* 汝 ware and Tang dynasty trichromatic *sancai* 三彩 (three colour) pieces. According to art historian Stacey Pierson: “In the field of Chinese art, the pre-eminence of Song dynasty (960-1279) ceramics is a widely accepted paradigm. While based on a very narrow interpretation of ceramics in the Song dynasty this notion of pre-eminence is one held in both China and the West. In China it was established early on, by Ming and late connoisseurs who themselves became the model for Western collectors in the 20th century.”³⁵ Similarly, models for Chinese furniture forms were established in the Song dynasty and perpetuated through a refined stylistic vocabulary throughout the Ming and early Qing dynasties.

Pierson cites the British ceramicist Bernard Leach (1887-1979) whose seminal work, *A Potter's Book*, published in 1940, eulogised Song ware as “the purest of pottery”: the uniqueness of Song porcelain and its artisanal qualities provided a resonant contrast with mass produced goods in a rapidly industrialising Britain. Leach was responding to the singular aspects of Song porcelain manufacture which emphasised the glaze of individualised items

³⁴ Specifically, Handler noted the relevance of the aesthetics of the Bauhaus design school in the approach to interior decoration by Western residents in Beijing. Sarah Handler, *Austere Luminosity*, 3. Handler's second chapter was reprinted as an article in the JCCFS entitled “A Ming Meditating Chair in Bauhaus Light”. *Journal of the Classical Chinese Furniture Society* 3:1 (Winter 1992). 26-38.

³⁵ See Michael H. Levenson. 2011. *Modernism*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 219-223, 169.

and which after its introduction to Britain in 1910 began to replace overtly decorative export porcelain as highly prized and collectable ceramic items. As Pierson notes, “these studies [such as that by Leach] are written from the perspective of British ceramics, not Chinese.”³⁶ The interpretation and recasting of Chinese objects within a contemporary Western paradigm applied also to the assimilation and collection of furniture objects by an elite Western audience. Leach’s statements such as “Enduring forms are full of quiet assurance. Overstatement is worse than understatement” and “Subordinate to form but intimately connected with it is the problem of decoration” have clear equivalence both with the stylistic properties of Chinese classical furniture and with modernist tenets.

Parallel with Leach’s “Sung Standard” and the attributes he extolled in East Asian pottery, the collection and visual properties of Ming and early Qing Chinese furniture from the early part of the twentieth century can be framed within a wider cultural shift towards preferencing objects which combined simplicity and restraint with a high level of artistry and workmanship.³⁷ Leach also commented that the status of craftsmen by the early twentieth century had altered such that handcrafts had become an acceptable and even privileged occupation for the middle classes in reaction to the intellectualisation and mechanisation of design which characterised industrially made goods. The relevance of an industrialised society, prevalence of factory-based manufacturing and the desire to counterbalance mass production with the preservation and recognition of traditional handcrafts was evident to Leach and his contemporaries, analogous to the theories of Karl Marx (1818-1883) on disillusionment with capitalism and the isolation of the worker from the means and process of production in the machine age.³⁸

4. The art historical status of furniture and the applied arts in China and the West

A consideration of this thesis is the process by which art historical narrative of Chinese furniture was established which prioritised particular objects over others, framed

³⁶ Stacey Pierson. “‘The Sung Standard’: Chinese Ceramics and British Studio Pottery in the 20th Century”. In Pierson, Stacey Ed. *Song Ceramics: Art History, Archaeology and Technology*. London, Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art, SOAS, 2004. 81-102. *Colloquies on art & archaeology in Asia* No 22. <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/4242/>. 81-84. Accessed 08 February 2024.

³⁷ Bernard Leach. 1940. Reprint 2014. *A Potter’s Book*. London: Unicorn Press Ltd. 51, 46, 36-37. It is notable that Leach was born in Hong Kong and had direct experience of Chinese and Western objects in their original cultural context.

³⁸ See, for example, David Summers. 2003. *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism*. London: Phaidon Press. 22, 565-566.

within an anthropological context of cross-cultural reciprocity. Establishing a *terminus a quo* for the status of furniture and for applied arts from both a Western and Chinese perspective provides critical context for the interaction of the historiography with shifting concepts of value. Implicit within art historical analysis is the process of benchmarking artistic accomplishment against objects within similar categories. As Michel Foucault has observed: “resemblance played a constructive role in the knowledge of western culture.”³⁹ The process of indexing applies both to the esteem in which broad categories (or “fields”) of art are held within a culture; and to the assessment of the value of objects assigned to a specific field of art, catechizing the merits of one object in each category comparison with another to identify which displays greater mastery. Prior to the advent of modernism in Western art when the individualism of the artist as cultural exponent fragmented the established homogeneity of creative output, the process of distinguishing pre-eminence in a work of art required artistic production to be indexed against objects of similar design or function. In China a cult of the personality of the artist as refined intellectual existed from early dynastic times, with the virtue and psyche of the scholar-literati as executors of calligraphy and painting exposed through the fugacious contact of brush and ink on a base media.⁴⁰ Thus the history of art in China has traditionally held in esteem the work of intellectual individuals whose work is celebrated for its exposition of character and spirit, differentiated by an attenuated uniqueness discernible to only the qualified beholder.

The secondary or applied arts in each culture are assessed and interpreted against the backdrop of contemporary fine art production. In China, a clear hierarchy of traditional Chinese arts placed the expressive literati arts of the brush above other forms of artistic activity in the cultural register. Furniture and cabinetmaking were traditionally considered lesser art forms in the Chinese hierarchy of the arts, ranked below the scholarly and expressive arts of calligraphy and painting and even below other forms of decorative and applied arts such as porcelain, textiles and carving. This fact is significant both to the handling and treatment of the object itself and the available documentary evidence on which to base art historical analysis and reconstruction of facts.

Written documentary evidence relating to the creation of identifiable items of Chinese furniture for private use deriving from the Ming and Qing periods in any language

³⁹ Michel Foucault. 2002. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. London: Routledge. 19. doi:10.4324/9781315660301.

⁴⁰ Referencing the concept of “spirit resonance” *qi yun* 气韵 identified by Xie He 谢赫 (6th century, n.d.) as the first and most essential of six “canons” of Chinese traditional art in *Guhua Pinlu* 古画品录 [The Record of the Classification of Old Painters] dated 550 CE. See Hu Jiaxing. 2018. *Study on Chinese Traditional Theory of Artistic Style*. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd. 110-113.

is extremely sparse. In *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, Ecke noted: “Documents for a history of Chinese furniture are numerous; the list of evidentiary sources provided are predominantly object-based including Shang and Chou bronzes, Shang pictographs, excavated furniture and furniture parts, stone carving, Buddhist statues and paintings.”⁴¹ Whilst these ancillary sources constitute important cultural evidence they do not directly attest to the circumstances of production or artisanship of furniture items. The paucity of record keeping in China extended beyond furniture to other forms of applied art. Writing of Chinese belt toggles in 1960, anthropologist Schuyler Cammann commented: “All too frequently we find that some common item of material culture has been so much taken for granted during past centuries that no one has bothered to record it, and now in modern times it is extremely difficult to trace its development because of the lack of information.”⁴²

The status of craftsmen and cabinetmakers

As described in the proceeding section, distinctions between the status and organisation of applied arts in China and the West extended to record keeping practices, resulting in a limited range of materials on which to base an art historical analysis of the production of Chinese furniture. This limitation extends to an understanding of details such as the selection, sourcing and origins of wood types and their employment in fine furniture. Rudolph Wittkower has noted that the end of the guild system in Renaissance Europe enabled the establishment of the artist as an individual creative force, emancipated from the depersonalised institutional modes of production that characterised the artist guild system.⁴³ The establishment in the canon of Western art of artist as personality and entrepreneur is detectable from the Italian Renaissance (broadly, 1450-1650) and extended to practitioners of the applied arts pursuant to the end of the guild system.⁴⁴ Throughout Chinese history, craftsmen outside the imperial workshops rarely achieved a level of personal recognition similar to their European counterparts. As Max Loehr observed in 1961 in “The Question of Individualism in Chinese Art”: “Other art forms (architecture, sculpture, lacquer work,

⁴¹ Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 1.

⁴² Schuyler Cammann, “Toggles and Toggle-Wearing.” *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 16, no. 4 (1960): 463-75. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3628889>.

⁴³ Rudolf Wittkower. “Individualism in Art and Artists: A Renaissance Problem.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 22, no. 3 (1961): 291-302. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2708126>.

⁴⁴ The guild system was officially terminated at varying times in different European countries and diminished in power and operation over extended periods of time (in Florence, for example, Emperor Joseph II ordered the closure of the guilds in 1770).

bronze casting, ceramics) were considered the work of craftsmen, and their names and lives are rarely recorded.”⁴⁵ Exceptions to this generality almost exclusively relate to imperial craftsmen, such as Yu Hao 喻浩 (c. 965-989), the master craftsman engaged by the Song emperor Taizong 宋太宗 (r. 976-997) in the construction of official buildings in Kaifeng; and Kuai Xiang 蒯祥 (1398-1481), the architect who founded the Imperial City in the Ming dynasty.⁴⁶

In contrast, the names of notable and acclaimed European cabinetmakers and their workshops date principally from the sixteenth century, with examples of attributable furniture identifiable from the early Renaissance period.⁴⁷ In “Brick and Mortar, Paint and Metal”, Livia Lupi points out that during the Renaissance the work of respected artists sometimes coincided with architectural projects, citing Filippo Brunelleschi’s (1377-1476) work in Florence as evidence that it was not typical in Renaissance Italy to delineate between the arts and the craft of building or architecture.⁴⁸ It is important here to note a critical divide between the esteem in which the practices of architecture, sculpture and carving were held in the West and in China and the relevance of this anomaly on the historiography of Chinese furniture due to its impact on the availability of primary source materials. For example, although we know the identity and associated works of a number of early Western cabinet makers such as the Venetian Ludovico de Rossi (1624-1707) or the German craftsman Abraham Roentgen (1711-1793), attributable pieces constructed by Chinese furniture artisans in private workshops are distinguished by their exceptional rarity.⁴⁹

As with the fine and calligraphic Chinese arts, cabinetmakers of the Ming and early Qing dynasties drew on an established vocabulary of carved decorative embellishments and traditional designs which visual evidence shows were repeatedly employed from the Song

⁴⁵ Max Loehr. “The Question of Individualism in Chinese Art.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 22, no. 2 (1961): 147-58. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2707829>. 147.

⁴⁶ On Yu Hao, see Alexandra Harrer. “The Paradox of the Angled Bracket-arm and the Unorthodox “Speech Patterns” of Shanxi Regional Architecture.” *Sino-Platonic Papers*, no. 279 August 2018, University of Pennsylvania. 19. https://sino-platonic.org/complete/spp279_shanxi_architecture.pdf. For Kuai Xiang see Joseph S.C. Lam, “Painting of the Imperial Palace and Zhu Bang,” in *Ming China: Courts and Contacts 1400-1450*. 2016. Ed. Craig Clunas, Jessica Harrison-Hall and Luk Yu-ping. London: The British Museum Press, 2016. 56-67.

⁴⁷ For example, the Church of the Frari in Venice contains a choir screen, perhaps best described as a piece of architectural furniture, by Bartolomeo Bon the Elder (c.1405- after 1464) and choir stalls attributed to Marco Cozzi from Vicenza (1420-1465). See Anne Markham Schulz. “The Sculpture of Giovanni and Bartolomeo Bon and Their Workshop.” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 68, no. 3 (1978): 1-81. Accessed 28 February 2024. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1006192>.

⁴⁸ Livia Lupi, “Brick and Mortar, Paint and Metal: Architecture and Craft in Renaissance Florence and Beyond,” *Architectural Histories* 11, no. 1 (2023): 4. <https://doi.org/10.16995/ah.9170>.

⁴⁹ See Claudio Cagliero. 2020. *La formazione giovanile di Pietro Piffetti, regio ebanista alla corte dei Savoia* [The early training of Pietro Piffetti, royal cabinetmaker at the court of Savoy]. Ivrea: Hever. The recorded names of craftsmen over centuries is also testament to differences in historical record keeping practices between China and the West.

dynasty onwards, thus largely discouraging displays of ingenuity in design or artistry conducive to individual recognition and veneration. As Oka and Kuijt describe, the sparing use of decoration also reflected Confucian principles of propriety and integrity.⁵⁰ Whilst it is also true of European furniture that the identity of the patron predominated that of the craftsman (see for example, Figure 8, a carved wooden bench created by an unnamed craftsman or studio for Leonardo de Medici and bearing his crest), as Walter Dyer wrote in 1917, “In general, [Renaissance] furniture was palatial rather than domestic.”⁵¹ In China, furniture items within the palace collection were collected and documented extensively in the course of compiling inventories and imperial household records. The furniture objects considered in this thesis principally relate to items which pursued customary designs with minimal invention or adornment, commissioned for domestic use by elite private patrons in the Ming and Qing dynasties rather than for use by China’s dynastic rulers. It is in this space that Max Loehr’s statement relative to the anonymity of craftsmen is most accurate.

Documentary and objectival evidence and attribution

In China the private structure and organisation of workshops required less formality around record keeping than (for example) the guilds system in Europe. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, Chinese cabinetmakers working outside the imperial workshops were organised into private commercial enterprises which did not require the same level of record keeping as the European guild systems.⁵² Florian Knothe notes that records exist from woodworking guilds in France which were established as early as 1290 to protect tradesmen and govern administrative matters such as the payment of taxes.⁵³ Although established by royal decree, the guilds in France were separate from the royal workshops which produced items for the crown and which have an equivalent in the imperial Chinese workshops. Doreen Sylvia Leach has observed that the archives of medieval guilds in London that document the names of carpenters and craftsmen dating back to the fourteenth century provide evidence for the

⁵⁰ Rahul Oka and Ian Kuijt, “Introducing an Inquiry into the Social Economies of Greed and Excess,” in “Social Economies of Greed and Excess,” *Economic Anthropology* 1, no. 1 (2014): 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sea2.12000>.

⁵¹ Walter A. Dyer “Furniture of the Italian Renaissance” *Arts & Decoration (1910-1918)* 7, no. 3 (1917): 131-34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43799760>. 132.

⁵² See Doreen Sylvia Leach, “Carpenters in Medieval London, c. 1240-c. 1540,” Ph.D. thesis in History, Royal Holloway, University of London, March 2017. Accessed 30 March 2024. <https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/en/publications/carpenters-in-medieval-london-c-1240-c-1540>.

⁵³ Florian Knothe. 2016. *Classic Furniture: Craftsmanship, Trade Organisations and Cross-Cultural Influences in East and West*. Hong Kong: University Museum and Art Gallery, Hong Kong University. 20-23.

craft and social status of carpenters. The paucity of original documentation or reported authorship in China is indicative of both the administration of workshops and of the social status of the cabinet maker in Chinese Ming and Qing society. As previously observed, the identity of individual cabinet makers and workshops is not well recorded, and few are known by name. It can also be convincingly argued that furniture commissioned by a wealthy patron to his own specifications including the selection of materials, decorative elements and appreciation of the skill of the appointed craftsman, spoke more eloquently of the taste of the owner and patron, rather than the importance of the craftsman himself.

Commonly cited circumstances for the lack of Chinese documentary records are the destructive effect of turmoil throughout centuries of political and social disruption which rendered any records that might have existed casualty to war and the circumstances of dynastic upheaval. The noted absence of documentary evidence attests to physical actualities and cultural differences in approaches to record keeping and to attitudes towards woodcraft and furniture construction, even when produced for elite literati patrons outside the Imperial household. Although there are some exceptions, as described below, Chinese furniture is typically unsigned and unmarked and the lack of primary information relating to either maker or patron does not lend itself easily to a traditional art historical approach. The repetition of styles and decorative elements in cabinetmaking over centuries of manufacturing yields few clues to the researcher regarding the artisanship and precise origins of individual pieces. Irrespective of the lack of documentary evidence, later Chinese writers began to classify furniture on a regional basis, for example as ‘Suzhou or *su* style’ *su shi jiaju* 苏式家具 (*su*-style furniture).⁵⁴

The number of treatises by Ming and Qing authors such as by Wen Zhenheng, Li Yu and others intended to serve as guides on superlative taste and good living gives substance to the view that the selection and commissioning of furniture and decorative household items attested to the accomplishment of the buyer rather than the skill of the manufacturer. There is little in writing from the period of production which relates directly to the technical art of cabinetmaking or to the arrangement and output of furniture workshops. The most definitive and the only work of direct relevance to this area is the *Lu ban mujing jiangjia jing* 鲁班木经匠家镜 (The Classic of Lu Ban and The Craftsman’s Mirror) which contains information relating to furniture production in diagrammatic and textual form, although the greater part

⁵⁴ See for example 蒲安国 Pu Anguo. 2015. *Mingqing Su Shi Jiaju* 明清苏式家具 [Ming and Qing Dynasty Su-Style Furniture]. 北京: 紫禁城出版社 Beijing: Forbidden City Press.

of the book deals with building work.⁵⁵ The *Classic of Lu Ban* originates from the Wanli period of the Ming dynasty (1573-1620) and was intended primarily as a guide for carpenters and the building trade as to the rituals and formalities required for the auspicious construction of dwellings and related contents. The book's usefulness as an art historical resource relevant to a cultural study of Chinese classical furniture is somewhat confined by its solely technical approach to the subject which is largely limited to the provision of measurements, focused principally on buildings and dwellings with a section on furniture. Alleviating this lack of wider social context for the organisation of furniture and carpentry workshops, the *Classic of Lu Ban* provides an artisanal counterpoint to the extravagant lifestyle texts published by Wen Zhenheng and Li Yu and provides some insight into the use of materials in application and the significance of decorative carved elements.

The physical impact of war, natural disasters and changes in dynastic rule compounded to severely limit the availability of extant primary research materials related to the production and consumption of applied arts in China, including furniture. As Yi Guo and Charles Le Blanc have conceded, the destruction of historical records by succeeding dynasties was deliberate and allowed for the reconstruction of historical narrative in favour of the victor.⁵⁶ The eradication of records from preceding dynasties extended to the burning not only of archival documents but also of buildings and objects. With regard to Chinese record keeping practices relevant to the creation of works of art, these frequently exist as an extension of the physical body of the artwork itself in the form of colophons and collectors' seals. This practice was extended relatively infrequently by scholarly patrons in the Ming and earlier dynasties to furniture items. Among the most notable examples are a set of four inscribed *zitan* armchairs with carved and incised poems, seals and colophons copied from the brushwork of four Ming scholars, documented by Ellsworth in the chapter "Ming Evidence for the Dating of Chinese Furniture" in his 1971 book.⁵⁷ C.L. Ma 可乐马 (n.d.) whose collection is described in the final chapter, has collected a considerable number of inscribed pieces for the purpose of historical study and reference in dating.

⁵⁵ The full title of this document is *Xinjuan jingban gongshi diaozhuo zhengshi Lu Ban mujing jiangjia jing* 新镌京版工师雕斲正式鲁班木经匠家镜 [Official Classic of Lu Ban and Artisan's Mirror for Carpenters and Carvers, Printed from Newly Engraved Wood Blocks from the Capital]. Ruitenbeek describes the *Classic of Lu Ban* "as a carpenter's manual compiled in the fifteenth century on the basis of materials dating from the Song and Yuan Dynasties" Klaas Ruitenbeek. 1993. *Carpentry and Building in Late Imperial China*. Leiden: E.J. Brill. 1, 117. Title translation Ruitenbeek.

⁵⁶ Yi Guo and Charles Le Blanc. "Research Findings Concerning Excavated Texts and Learning in Early China." *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 11, no. 2 (2016): 168-84. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44157004>.

⁵⁷ See Robert Hatfield Ellsworth. 1971. *Chinese Furniture: Hardwood Examples of the Ming and Early Ch'ing Dynasties*. New York: Random House. 26-42.

5. Theoretical frameworks for historiographic and object-based analysis

Analysis of the historiography of Chinese historic furniture, advancements in the narrative history and associated collecting practices are examined within a theoretical framework which seeks to examine the reception of artworks within an evolutive sociocultural context. The application of theory relevant the historiography and consumption of Chinese furniture engenders a multidisciplinary approach spanning archaeology, social theory and anthropological rationalisation. Increasingly prevalent from the mid-century onwards, archaeological philosophies addressing the interchange of objects from transoceanic to developed, often hegemonic cultures provide a useful framework against which to examine the international commutability of artworks. Referencing established anthropological and social theory for art objects possessing “social lives” according to Arjun Appadurai; and “agency” (Alfred Gell), I consider the selection, indexing and survivorship bias in the primacy of artworks and the creation of “art fields” and “habitus” (citing Bourdieu).⁵⁸

Reframing the narrative: objectivity and perspective in art historiography

An understanding of the evidential circumstances and attitudes shaping the twentieth century reception and interpretation of Chinese furniture by Western writers and collectors becomes more exigent in view of the paucity of historic documentation and archival data addressing the production and consumption of Chinese furniture in the Ming. According to anthropologist James Deetz (1930-2000): “Historiography... is a value influenced construction of past reality... the values influencing the construction are many and varied. Some are shared widely by members of society, while others are restricted to special interest groups.”⁵⁹ In the case of the earliest authors and collectors of Chinese hardwood furniture, the principal figures represent an idiosyncratic subset of the Beijing expatriate community resident in China prior to the end of the second Sino-Japanese War and the establishment of the PRC in 1949; as well as a smaller number of Chinese academics drawn from similar

⁵⁸Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511819582>. Alfred Gell.1998. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). Pierre Bourdieu and Randal Johnson. 1993. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993.

⁵⁹ James Deetz. “History and Archaeological Theory: Walter Taylor Revisited.” *American Antiquity* 53, no. 1 (1988): 13-22. <https://doi.org/10.2307/281151>.

social backgrounds (as in the case of Wang Shixiang and Chen Mengjia). In critiquing the work of archaeological historian Walter W. Taylor's (1913-1997) observations on archaeology and related disciplines which defined historiography as "the writing of history," Deetz notes that the act of bridging historic data inadequacies as requiring the application of imagination in the present to create a convincing and chronologically satisfactory narrative about the past.⁶⁰ Taylor's writing, contemporary with the publication of *Chinese Domestic Furniture* and *Chinese Household Furniture*, frames historiography as a cultural product emblematic of the author's informed but subjective, current-day point of view.⁶¹

Analysis of theoretical texts leads to a hypothesis that art historiographies may subjectively represent the ideologies of the writer in reconstituting a montage of fact and assumption and provides critical insight into the reception of art works within a sociocultural paradigm contemporary to the historiographer. Social scientist Ian Lustick has questioned the plausibility of reconciling multiple "histories" with the potential for differences in recounting of fact and suggests that it may be more pertinent to acknowledge the potentiality and relevance of conflicting narratives driven by partiality or nonobjectivity. Lustick's commentary relates to an assemblage of historical facts in potential service of a preferred narrative or argument. In art history, selection bias may be inherent in the preferencing of individual objects; a factor which may have particular relevance to literature published by connoisseurs or art-dealers. Lustick points out that the institutional framing of objects or categories may be problematic in canonising items to ensure they retain their value as source material for academic research (and by extension, their financial value).⁶² This scenario may be applied equally to the interpretation of documentary materials or to objects displayed in art historiographical publications or in art collections in public museums.

The concept of reconstructed histories viewed through a contemporary lens assumes a particular relevance in the establishment of a discourse on Chinese "classical" furniture established by Ecke and his contemporaries in the interpretation, selection and recasting of objects, amplified by their real and figurative transition between cultural geographies. The historiography of Chinese domestic (non-imperial) furniture represents a privileged subset of objects selected from the broader lexicon of utilitarian furniture objects which largely ignored softwood furniture of the proletariat and rejected ornate palace furniture. As if taking

⁶⁰ Deetz, "History and Archaeological Theory," 17-18.

⁶¹ Taylor's attempt to define the term "historiography" is indicative of its relative newness as a field in an era contemporary with the writing of Gustav Ecke and George Kates on Chinese Furniture. See Deetz, "History and Archeological Theory," 19.

⁶² Ian S. Lustick. "History, Historiography, and Political Science: Multiple Historical Records and the Problem of Selection Bias." *The American Political Science Review* 90, no. 3 (1996): 605-618. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2082612>. 605, 613.

cue from David Hume's (1711-1776) admiration of the quality of durability in "Of the Standard of Taste," published in 1760, Ecke, Kates and later writers similarly failed to acknowledge the continued production and literati consumption of lacquer furniture in China alongside hardwood furniture in the Ming Dynasty, of which extant examples are extremely rare and undervalued, perhaps as a consequence of literary obscurity (see, for example, a black lacquered rectangular-back armchair in the collection of the Palace Museum at Figure 9). Synonymous with the designation 'classic' which Western writers attached to Chinese furniture, Hume stated "durable admiration, which attends those works, that have survived all the caprices of mode and fashion, all the mistakes of ignorance and envy." As set out in the opening chapters of this study, the inception of a modern historiography dates to a period between the end of the imperial regime in China and the establishment of PRC. In this politically turbulent but golden window of time, Qing literati families assumed the role of arbiters of taste, modernisers in education and politics, and defenders and benefactors of an indigenous artistic heritage.

The intercultural recasting of objects in transition

Nicole Chiang, citing Craig Clunas, submits that notions of Chinese art and definitions of art ascribed to specific objects and groups of people in China need to be approached carefully and with an understanding that labels are often attached by cultures outside of the indigenous society from which the objects themselves derived.⁶³ This point is further emphasised by the work of art historians such as Clunas, Jonathan Hay, Nicholas Pearce and Jason Steuber in studies which view history through the lens of epitomical objects and their historical narratives.⁶⁴ Theoreticians of material culture such as Andrew Pickering propose that objects not only signify historical fact but possess an independent agency which is both transformative and transformed by their dynamic surroundings.⁶⁵ Viewed through a broader lens the extrinsic associations and attachments imposed by collectors and cultural

⁶³ Nicole Chiang "Redefining an imperial collection: problems of modern impositions and interpretations." *The Journal of Art Historiography* 10 (2014): 1.2.
<https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/chiang.pdf>

⁶⁴ Nicholas Pearce, and Jason Steuber. 2012. *Original Intentions: Essays on Production, Reproduction, and Interpretation in the Arts of China*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida. See also Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces*, 2010, and Craig Clunas. 2004. *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

⁶⁵ Andrew Pickering, 2010. 'Material Culture and the Dance of Agency', in Dan Hicks, and Mary C. Beaudry (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies* (Online edition, Oxford Academic, 18 Sept. 2012). <https://doi-org.ezproxy1.lib.gla.ac.uk/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199218714.013.0007>.

conquistadors provide an important art historical context for the interpretation and attachment of both semaphoric and social values which reveal as much about the interpreter as they do about the originating culture. The recasting of objectival identities which occurs as artworks are transferred across geographies and between cultures relates to the consumption of tangible heritage in multiple cross-cultural exchanges, in particular those between colonising powers and subordinate nation states and can involve physical reinvention to meet the aesthetic standard of a receiving culture.⁶⁶

As Sonia Atalay has questioned: “What are the processes and ethics by which one group gains and retains the power to exercise stewardship of, control, speak for, or write the past of others? And how can we create a counter-discourse to such processes?”⁶⁷ In some cases, Chinese collectors in post-Imperial China were compelled by economic necessity to raise capital by distributing their art collections to private Western collectors and museums. The aesthetic and intellectual literati ideal provided a venerable alternative to the imperial system on which to base an alternative cultural history with implications for collecting practices by foreign buyers. Irrespective of entrenched interdependencies between literati scholar officials and China’s imperial rulers, the rejection of florid late Qing dynasty palace art objects and romanticisation of the literati ideal and its associative unadorned aesthetic resonated with the development of modernism in America and Europe. As Lyons and Papadopoulos comment in their introduction to *The Archaeology of Colonialism*, “Our imagination of the past has been coloured by recent colonial enterprises and studies of native peoples that may, in fact, have little bearing on the realities of societies preceding the advent of Europe as a world power.” Relevant to furniture in both its original and collected context, Lyons and Papadopoulos further concede that artefacts intended for utilitarian or quotidian purposes have a social function which exceeds their implicit use value and may be significant to the interrelationships between participants jointly bound by a social order or structure.⁶⁸

Of the interpretive repositioning and reordering of Chinese art by acquisitive global cultures, Liu Yu-Jen commented “In the early twentieth century, “Chinese art” as a category for classifying a variety of objects produced in China was still a fluid and contested idea.”⁶⁹ Liu’s analysis relates to the categorical division and representation of objects in Stephen

⁶⁶ See Stacey Pierson. “The Movement of Chinese Ceramics: Appropriation in Global History.” *Journal of World History* 23, no. 1 (2012): 9-39. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41508050>.

⁶⁷ Sonya Atalay. “Indigenous Archaeology as Decolonizing Practice.” *American Indian Quarterly* 30, no. 3/4 (2006): 280-310. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4139016>.

⁶⁸ Claire L. Lyons and John K. Papadopoulos, *The Archaeology of Colonialism* (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2002). 2, 8.

⁶⁹ Liu Yu-Jen, “Stealing Words, Transplanting Images: Stephen Bushell and the Intercultural Articulation of ‘Chinese Art’ in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Archives of Asian Art* 68, no. 2 (2018): 191-214, 191.

Bushell's (1843-1908) 1904 book *Chinese Art*, taxonomically structured to represent objects principally in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London which prioritised for analysis those objects which Bushell had collected for the Museum (ceramics) and for his own collection (bronzes).⁷⁰ The most important categories of art from a Chinese perspective, painting and calligraphy were grouped together under the label "Pictorial Arts". Furniture was not included in Bushell's book, but architecture and wooden sculpture were. Liu submits that "*Chinese Art*... suggests the emergence of a new way of grouping that had never before been seen in China: that is, the category "Art Object" (美术品, *meishupin*)... It can thus be argued that the shape of Chinese art, as it stands today, was moulded as much by the Orientalist cultural enterprise as by Chinese nationalist aspirations."⁷¹

Liu's reference to an "Orientalist cultural enterprise" may be applied to both the large-scale acquisition of artworks in China by buying agents for western museums and to the antiques trade in Beijing, Shanghai and other major cities which in addition to works of art were a significant source of information and knowledge on Chinese furniture in absence of written sources of documentation. For example, as Warren Cohen has pointed out, Laurence Sickman's early tutorship in Chinese art during his time in Beijing during the 1930s came largely from commercial dealers of all nationalities.⁷² In his acceptance speech of the Charles Lang Freer Medal in 1973 Laurence Sickman described interactions with "the better dealers... scholarly men knowledgeable about rare books, old rubbings, ceramics and antiquities."⁷³

Taxonomies and the significance of classification

Ming tastemakers such as Wen Zhenheng, Li Yu; and Gao Lian 高濂 (1573-1620) referenced types of furniture to be used in aspirational upper-middle class Chinese households and in this process grouped furniture into categories appropriate for use in

⁷⁰ Stephen Wootton Bushell, *Chinese Art*, vol. 1 (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, Board of Education, 1904).

⁷¹ Liu, "Stealing Words," 201. The publication of *Chinese Art* focused on the collected items that Bushell has purchased during his time practicing as a physician in China and in his capacity as a buying agent for the Victoria and Albert Museum.

⁷² Warren I. Cohen. "Art Collecting as International Relations: Chinese Art and American Culture." *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 1, no. 4 (1992): 409-34. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23613355>. Page 426.

⁷³ Laurence Sickman, *Acceptance Speech, Presentation of the Fifth Charles Lang Freer Medal* (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1973). Accessed December 17, 2020. <https://ia804709.us.archive.org/28/items/fifthpresentatio00free/fifthpresentatio00free.pdf>. 16.

specific private or social settings such as studies and reception halls. During the Qing dynasty, records of furniture held within the imperial palace collection were collated in the *Huoji dang* 活计档 (Record of Works) compiled as an inventory by the Office of the Imperial Household.⁷⁴ Beyond the imperial archives, perhaps the best-known inventory of Chinese furniture is that of Yan Song, 严嵩 (1480-1567) the disgraced Ming dynasty scholar official whose extravagant furniture consumption is evident in the detailed list of confiscated furniture items, and the records of the Qing imperial household. The significance of taxonomies in establishing a cohesive group of objects against which to index individual items and to benchmark quality and eventually, value, is evident in both the Western and Chinese historiography on Ming and Qing furniture and has precedent in historic inventories of furniture and in the writing of Ming tastemakers. Regina Krahll writes of the importance of identifying, naming and grouping objects together so that they can be recognized as having desirability over comparable objects within the same canon. Noting the imprecise nature of applying ancient names [in the case of porcelain, linked to particular geographical locations] in a modern context. Krahll submits that the Ming text on good taste, the *Gegu yaoluo* 格古要论 (Essential treatise on antiquities) written by Cao Zhao in 1388, sets out a proscribed number of types of ceramic ware and that a similar Ming treatise *Xuande dingyi pu* 宣德鼎彝谱 (*Treatise on offering vessels of the Xuande reign*) attributed to Lü Zhen 吕振 (1365-1426), compiled in 1428 was foundational to establishing the “five famous Song wares.”⁷⁵

The recording of objects typically served two purposes: firstly as inventories listing stock items, which art historian Francesco Freddolini, commenting on Medici inventories, suggests provided an important “‘snapshot’ of the material culture of a dwelling in relation to a single and specific moment in the life of the owner(s).”⁷⁶ Cast in this context, it may be argued that the accumulated furniture pieces gathered by Ecke, Kates and their

⁷⁴ Yijun Wang and Kyoungjin Bae, "Kupiao and the Accounting System of the Imperial Household Workshops," in *Making the Palace Machine Work: Mobilizing People, Objects, and Nature in the Qing Empire*, ed. Martina Siebert, Kai Jun Chen, and Dorothy Ko (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 93-124. Accessed July 23, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048553228-009>.

⁷⁵ Regina Krahll, "Famous brands and counterfeits: Problems of Terminology and Classification in Song Ceramics" in *Song Ceramics: Art History, Archeology and Technology. Colloquies on Art & Archaeology in Asia* No. 22. Held June 16-18, 2003. Published in 2004 by Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art, SOAS, London. 61-81. 6163. The *Xuande dingyi pu* featured six Song wares in the imperial palace storerooms. (See Krahll, "Famous brands," 63). *Xuande dingyi pu* 宣德鼎彝谱 [Manual of Sacrificial Vessels of the Xuande Reign 1426-1435], attributed to Lü Zhen 吕振 (1365-1426) compiled in 1428.

⁷⁶ Francesco Freddolini: The Grand Dukes and Their Inventories: Administering Possessions and Defining Value at the Medici Court. In *Inventories and Catalogues: Material and Narrative Histories*. Ed. Freddolini and Anne Helmreich. *Journal of Art Historiography*. XI (2014). [https://arthistoriography.wordpress.com/11-dec14/](https://arthistoriography.wordpress.com/11-dec14/.). 2.

contemporaries as recorded in visual and textual form in *Chinese Domestic Furniture* and *Chinese Household Furniture* represent an inventory of items collected by a group of likeminded compatriots across multiple places of residence, united in shared experience, at a definitive, suspended historical juncture. According to Freddolini: “Inventories... were far from mere inert lists of things... creating a flow of information that was tantamount to the movement of objects through time and space.”⁷⁷ In this context it is relevant to also consider the significance of the actual format of the greater body of literature that forms the Western historiographies of Chinese Ming and early Qing furniture. Freddolini notes that the formation of catalogues and inventories carries a significance far in excess of that usually considered to relate to lists “value often drives the formation of a list: in other words, both inventories and catalogues have been compiled, historically, to select or distinguish particular objects above others and assemble these parts into a new collective whole with signifying capacity.”

6. Methodology and research approach

The analysis in this thesis draws from related fields and synthesizes for the first time a comprehensive review and critique of the historiography on Chinese hardwood furniture from a range of authors and time periods, beginning in the first half of the twentieth century. A review of the historiography is contextualised by observational analysis of collected objects, archival research and information from interviews with actors in the field. The focus of the research presented in this thesis is on domestic rather than imperial furniture with its implications for social custom and functional usage rather than for displays of state power. The quasi-private nature and function of indigenous Chinese domestic furniture for use in the dwelling space is examined with reference to its reinterpretation in a globalised modern context and elevation in status to collectable item both for contemporary use and in the museum setting. Commensurate with the social orientation of furniture as functioning objects of cultural and artistic value, its art-historical study encompasses a number of interrelated disciplines, notably anthropology and related fields including archaeology and architecture.

The period in which many of the initial advancements in knowledge and appreciation of Chinese hardwood furniture were made was distinguished by rapid social and economic

⁷⁷ Freddolini, “The Grand Dukes and Their Inventories,” 8.

progress and the establishment of new political and global paradigms. The evidence cited attesting to the establishment of Ming and early Qing style furniture as a distinct art historical classification aims to recognize the impact of international political milieu on the reception and perception of Chinese art objects. Whilst the research presented focuses on the interpretation of a number of important catalytic historiographic works, this analysis is cast within the macro political and economic environment, with an emphasis on understanding how perceptions and actions taken at an individual level resulted from a set of broader global and social criteria. The situational analysis considered in this account includes a critique of the reception of objects and observation of selective biases impacting their perception.

Overview: Research and Thesis Structure

The presentation of the research is structured both chronologically and geographically, starting with the earliest Western historiographical works on Chinese furniture and providing an evolutive survey to the present day. The first part of the research focuses on the mid-century period when many of the key ideas on furniture which continue to impact ongoing notions of value, desirability and consumption, were initially formed. I chart the rise in knowledge and evolution of Chinese Ming and early Qing furniture starting with the earliest books authored in Europe during the first two decades of the twentieth century with an acknowledgement of earlier historical sources. The thesis is structured in four parts which provide an overview and context for the development of Chinese furniture as a collectable field. Providing context for the historiographical works studied, I address catalytic factors relevant to substantiating the perspectives of individual authors and their involvement in “making art” through the concepts, ideologies and perspectives propagated in their writing. In this respect analysis focuses on the early aggregation of fragmentary facts and information on which to base the formation of a body of knowledge on the subject.

Chapter One focuses on literature from the early twentieth century relevant to a grandiose European aesthetic tradition situated within a value system built on the display of luxury objects characterised by extravagant surface detailing, lacquering and carving. This mode of consumption of exoticised foreign goods has more in common with a taste for imperial Chinese art, chinoiserie and an idealised Western perspective on an oriental aesthetic. At the same time, European centres of art collecting at the turn of the nineteenth century interpreted imported Chinese goods as an extension of highly decorative and

ostentatious Western interior systems. This initial chapter begins with an examination of the reception Chinese furniture expounded through the literature and with a review of the taste and collecting for lacquered and painted Chinese furniture and the level of knowledge evidenced in the early historiography.

This analysis forms a point of departure for an evolution in the Western collecting of Chinese furniture, the nexus of which transitioned in the 1930s and 40s from Europe to Beijing. The conditions in pre-war China at this unique historical juncture conducive to the easy formation of public and private collections of art are considered here with relevance to the availability and accessibility of objects observed and consumed by foreign nationals in a context autochthonous to the object. Alongside the acquisition of Chinese hardwood furniture for use by expatriates in traditional courtyard homes, I consider the means by which knowledge was gathered and exchanged colloquially through a cross-cultural discourse, as exemplified in the publication of the initial books on hardwood Ming-style furniture.

The second chapter addresses the maturation and transition of collecting from China to America in the wake of a worsening political landscape at the end of the second Sino-Japanese war. The relocation of hardwood Ming-style Chinese furniture items collected in Beijing and subsequent display in American museums and availability for sale, initially through auction houses and then through commercial dealers, is examined with relevance to a dualistic escalation in literary focus from scholars and commercial dealers. The complexities of both types of historiographies during this period provides grounds for a review of cultural tendencies expressed through anthropologically focused analysis of the evidence for the early development of Chinese furniture. In conjunction with the advancement in museum interest and public collecting in the 1970s, I assess the resonant implications of commercially derived dealer-literature and catalogue style publications and increase in specialist art historical publications in the 1970s and 1980s. In addition, I evaluate the momentum in scholarship in the light of material culture research and an internationalised dialogue with Chinese and researchers pursuant to the renewal of diplomatic relations between China and the West during this period.

Following the establishment of historiography and collections of Chinese hardwood furniture in America and Europe, the third chapter addresses precedent literature for Chinese scholarship on the topic. Commencing in the 1940s, coetaneous with the earliest works on Chinese domestic furniture by European and American authors who were or had been present in Beijing, I assess the foundations for Chinese research materials. An examination of the activities of the early collectors and instigators whose activities engendered a focus

on the appreciation of China's indigenous furniture heritage facilitates consideration of the relationship with architectural study and engagement with westernised modes of learning during this point at the formation of a new Chinese nation state. This chapter analyses the development of an indigenous Chinese cultural history of hardwood furniture in the environment of the newly formed PRC and attendant political and socioeconomic impacts on culture and scholarship during this turbulent period. The opening up of China after 1978 provided a foundation for increased global appreciation and circulation of furniture objects and engendered circumstances relevant to greater art-historical analysis of Ming and early-Qing texts. Perhaps most critically, I examine differences and similarities between Western and Chinese collecting tendencies and the impact of Western consumption on Chinese perceptions of an indigenous furniture heritage.

The final chapter concludes with a theoretical and historical review of the collecting and display practices of Chinese furniture in light of the written historiography and activities of literary actors discussed in earlier chapters. Knowledge and activities in the field evolved through the focus of individual collectors and museum curators which intersected with the relevant literature. This section begins with a consideration of the importance of exhibitions of Chinese domestic hardwood furniture by returning expatriate residents of Beijing in regional American museums in raising awareness. It continues with a non-exhaustive examination of the formation of important museum collections in America, selecting for analysis the collections at the NAMA, the Minneapolis Institute of Art (MIA) and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. In addition, I consider the former collection of the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture in Renaissance (now Apollo), California. As I articulate, these institutional collections have been selected for analysis based on the quality of the collection and the differentiated collecting practices inherent in their formation.

Whilst this section focuses on case studies and examples of collections formed in America, it is important to acknowledge that there several notable collections of Chinese furniture in Europe. Although a significant amount of Chinese furniture was exported to America in the early twentieth century, private and public collections of Chinese furniture exist in many European countries and in Hawaii, the southernmost North American state. Notable European collections include those at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Guimet Museum in Paris, both of which exhibit comprehensive examples of Chinese furniture from across the spectrum of materials and production periods. Notwithstanding the existence of these collections and others such as the Design Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen which includes Chinese furniture displayed alongside European furniture to

exemplify the influence of classical Chinese furniture on modern design, collections of classical Chinese furniture exist in greater numbers in public museums in America than in Europe. This may be linked to the fact that, as Ian K. Shin has argued, in the early part of the twentieth century, the nexus of Chinese art collecting shifted from Europe to America in pursuit of soft power and evidence of American dominance in Asia and over the Pacific, and of “U.S. exceptionalism.”⁷⁸

Collections examined in the fourth chapter of this thesis were selected both on the basis of the quality of the collection and the ability to demonstrate a link between historiography and the development of collecting practices, such as at the NAMA. However, the impact of the COVID 19 virus during the period of study also impacted the methodology applied to the selection of case studies. Government travel restrictions implemented for an extended period during the global pandemic reduced the possibility of in-depth research of collections spread over a wider geographical area in a way that would have allowed satisfactory and appropriate consideration. For this reason, firsthand research visits were restricted to the museums and collections in America which are described in this chapter, where access was available both to the collections and in some cases, to individuals involved in their formation or to archival materials and curatorial staff such as at the NAMA in Kansas City, Missouri. In addition, As I propose in the Conclusion, there is scope for further research into collections in Europe in contrast with the historical development of American collections.

The final part of this chapter addresses the transition of collecting activities to China and formation of representative and idiosyncratic institutional and single-owner collections in China, including the C.L. Ma Classical Furniture Museum in Tianjin, China. The analysis also examines important public collections in Chinese institutions, notably the Shanghai Museum, the collection of classical Chinese furniture displayed at Tsinghua University Art Museum in Beijing and a small group of important classical *huanghuali* furniture on display at Prince Gong’s Palace in Beijing. This section seeks to explicate and clarify indigenous collecting patterns of Chinese furniture within China and to expound connections and differences between the Chinese and Western collections described in this chapter. I further seek to elucidate examples of furniture items which are associated with the historiography discussed in early chapters or returned from collections abroad.

⁷⁸ Ian Shin, K. "The Chinese Art “Arms Race”: Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism in Chinese Art Collecting and Scholarship Between the United States and Europe, 1900–1920", *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 23, 3. 2016. 229-256. 230-231. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/18765610-02303009>

Literature Review and Archival Research Materials

A critical review of the relevant literature is foundational to the study of historiography and provides a framework for assessing the contemporary social significance and reception of art objects and their associated collecting practices. The literature examined here combines analysis of seminal works with supporting source materials which explicate the basis for the formation of the concepts and ideas expressed and seek to identify original sources of information and meaning. As the research addresses the interpretation of historic Chinese furniture in a modern context, beyond the original circumstances and intentions of its production, much of the research presented draws on sources created during the period in question. References to contemporary Ming and Qing materials are made for the purpose of comparative analysis and to provide insight into the original interpretation and uses of furniture items. For this reason, a review of the literature is based primarily on sources deriving from the twentieth century. Contemporary Chinese sources are included in light on circumstances in China during the period between 1949-1978 and later. Comparison between English language sources and Chinese translations of the same works, prepared for different audiences, sometimes yields surprising differences relevant to attitudes towards global assimilation of Chinese artefacts.

As the subject of Chinese hardwood Ming-style furniture exists principally within the field of connoisseurship and adjacent to the academic art-historical sphere, the materials drawn on in this analysis encompass a range of scholarly and anecdotal sources. References to anecdotal source include literature which is journalistic, brevilouquent or cursory in nature and which has not been subject to peer review. These sources comprise newspaper articles, interviews, sale catalogues and books by non-scholarly authors which fill important gaps in both the knowledge and literature on both the circulation of objects and their interpretation and significance within a range of predefined contexts. This process of discovery through research and association has enabled new perspectives and approaches to the subject matter through connections which exist between previously unexplored source materials. This includes both the archival materials and research materials referenced in Chapter Four, but also fragments of information, for example from newspapers and journal articles which add supplemental information and evidence to an area which has been under explored in academic literature.

The focus of the research is an analysis of the historiography of Ming and early Qing furniture with the objective of establishing how the ideas that inform collecting practices, preference and consumption have been formed. It is hoped that this will open up new avenues of investigation, collaboration and academic study on historic Chinese furniture which is at present undervalued and falls outside the narrow definition of appreciation and value judgments established by a number of key actors and historiographers in the early twentieth century. Previously unstudied material has come to light in the form of the Kullgren Collection Archives which are now in the possession of Chinese antique dealer and expert Nicholas Grindley. A study of these materials which comprise correspondence, illustrations and other materials provides new insights into the earliest museum exhibition of Chinese hardwood furniture in America in 1942 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). The Kullgren archive has not previously been available to researchers and adds new material to an understanding of the knowledge and display practices at the time of the exhibition.

CHAPTER 1: FOUNDATIONS FOR AN EARLY WESTERN HISTORIOGRAPHY OF CHINESE FURNITURE

The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.

Now it was disappearing, in a sense it had happened, its time was over.⁷⁹

Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1977

This thesis commences with an examination of the social and cultural circumstances which propagated an antecedent focus on Chinese furniture among Western art historians and connoisseurs of Chinese art in the early decades of the twentieth century. The analysis in this opening chapter seeks to identify and situate foundational conditions prescient to the formation of a body of literature on Chinese classic furniture within the context of a time of wider cultural and political change across both East and West and the consequent inception of emergent ideologies and knowledge on Western scholarship. Deciphering a non-linear but observable progression from the earliest writing by European authors on Chinese furniture from the 1920s (primarily dealers in Chinese art located in important centres of Asian art, notably Paris and London) to books by academic Western expatriate residents in China after the initiation of the Chinese Republic provides a foundational basis for examining the formation of a canon of classical Chinese furniture as a distinctive, esteemed and collectable aesthetic classification of Chinese art.

1. Separated by time and space: Antecedents for a literary history of Chinese furniture

Whereas the major proportion of this thesis takes as its focus the historiographical and collecting practices in the twentieth century, evidence for pre-existing conceptual attitudes towards Chinese furniture may be examined through the lens of fragmented antecedent literary commentary found in early Western experiential narratives on China. Evidence derived from the travel writing and records of explorers and missionary visitors to

⁷⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2003. (1977 Reprint). 9.

China provide valuable, albeit anecdotal, testimony for both the ritualistic importance and social function of furniture in China during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) and insights into its aesthetic presentation and cross-cultural reception. A global trade in Chinese luxury artefacts and the desirability of such objects as collectables with the ability to convey social status and value through a combination of scarcity and highly worked ornamentation, was established between Europe and China by the time of the Ming dynasty. The global luxury trade between China and Europe at this time focused principally on porcelain but also included textiles and other covetable and engaging consumables.⁸⁰ The written testimony of the Spanish Augustinian friar, Juan González de Mendoza (1545-1618) who was present in the Philippines during the 16th Century is among the earliest and perhaps most detailed documentary sources for the reception of Chinese furniture by a Western audience in China. Mendoza's testimonial, later reprinted in French and English, documented the experience of Spanish Augustinian friars in China and is considered one of the earliest Western sinological works. A passage from Mendoza's book states:

[The Chinese] are very ingenious in using sculpture and masonry, and are great painters of foliage, birds and hunting scenes, as one can see from the beds and tables that are brought from their country. I saw one brought to the city of Lisbon in the year 1582 by Captain Rivera, Grand Sheriff of Manila. In order to show the price and value of this table, I will be content to say that it was admired by the King of Spain himself, although he is not in the habit of admiring many things. And not only he admired it but all those who saw it.⁸¹

Even earlier precedent for empiric travel literature referencing the use of furniture in China exists in Marco Polo's account of his time in China at the time of the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368). As is well known, Polo's account of his time in China was relayed in eulogistic rhetoric expounding the magnificence of Kublai Khan's (r. 1264-1294) empire. References to furniture centred around court custom and the use of furniture to display rank and civility aligned with European social standards and practices, for example: "They speak well and

⁸⁰ See, for example, Anne Gerritsen and Stephen McDowall, "Material Culture and the Other: European Encounters with Chinese Porcelain, ca. 1650-1800." *Journal of World History* 23, no. 1 (2012): 87-113. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41508052>.

⁸¹ Juan González de Mendoza, *Histoire du Grand Royaume de la Chine* [History of the Great Kingdom of China], translated from Spanish into French by Luc de la Porte. Paris: Jeremie Perier, 1588. Original text in Appendix 1. Compiled and edited by de Mendoza, the book contained records of Spanish Jesuit missionaries who had travelled to China; notably Martin de Rada (1533-1578) and Jerónimo Marín (n.d.) who travelled to China in 1575.

clearly, they greet you courteously, with a smiling and pleasant face, and they eat at table with gentlemanly elegance.”⁸²

2. Parallel and precedent fields of knowledge: Towards a Western historiography

A review of the convenient historiography of Chinese furniture is informed and augmented by considering coetaneous advancements in scholarship related to other forms of Chinese art, in particular architecture, in view of the close relationship that existed between building and furniture production in China. The *Lu Ban Jing* reveals a fundamental practical and philosophical association between the study of Chinese historical architecture and furniture due not least to the physical convergence (albeit on a smaller scale) between the joinery techniques of Chinese furniture and that of traditional wooden-framed Chinese buildings. A handscroll in the National Palace Museum in Taiwan, *Hangong chunxiao tu* 汉宫春晓图 (Spring Dawn in the Han Palace), painted by the Ming dynasty artist Qiu Ying 仇英 (c.1494-1552) shows the close link between building construction and furniture, with the painted stretcher of the palace architecture echoing that of the table depicted in the painting. (Figure 1.1) A critical parallel between the fields of furniture and architecture exists in the status and esteem awarded to both by late Qing and early Republican Chinese scholars in their re-evaluation of indigenous cultural heritage; and to their later ‘discovery’ and elevation into the realm of academic culture and scholarship by sinologists and writers such as John Calvin Ferguson, Gustav Ecke and Wang Shixiang.⁸³ The writing of these three actors and those of their counterparts in China in light of its relevance to collecting practices as well as their respective connections to both furniture and architecture will be analysed in detail in the course of this study.

Writing in 1964, Su Gin-Djih 徐敬直 (1906-1983), architect and founding President of the Hong Kong Society of Architects, commented:

⁸² Further references to furniture in Marco Polo’s *Travels* relate to seating at imperial feasts and official receptions which was arranged according to rank and status. L. F. Benedetto, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2004. ProQuest Ebook Central. Accessed 27 December 2022. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/detail.action?docID=199502>.

⁸³ Ferguson’s 1939 *Survey of Chinese Art* included sections on both architecture and furniture; the section on furniture is presented in Chapter 8 of the *Survey* and is preceded by the section on architecture at Chapter 7. John C. Ferguson. *Survey of Chinese Art*. Shanghai: The Commercial Press, 1939.

Building in China during the Semi-Colonial era was monopolised by foreign architects. Construction work in China, which was originally considered not a job for intellectuals, was generally undertaken by masons... Architects in the past were master builders trained and raised through years of apprenticeship, by memory work and by practising the rules of the treatise. They belonged to individual groups and their skill was taught to them by their masters, and they in turn imparted their knowledge to their own apprentices.⁸⁴

There are clear affinities between the traditional organisation and training of Chinese architects, who were essentially builders replicating established vernacular forms, and that of cabinet makers in the Ming and early Qing dynasties, who also typically produced variations on a traditional model. As described in the Introduction, although the best cabinet makers and architects in the West have long been awarded a higher status for their technical and artistic knowledge and skill, historically the carpenters and builders of China were largely anonymous members of a lower ranking class of artisanal workers. This perception of the profession began to alter after the arrival of foreigners in China in the late nineteenth century and with the training of Chinese architects in Europe and America who, on return to China from 1921 onward made “the designing of buildings a job for intellectuals instead of masons.”⁸⁵

Gustav Ecke’s 1944 book, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, drew strong and frequent parallels between the two fields of architecture and furniture, opening with the introductory words in the Preliminary: “Chinese furniture has retained its architectural character.”⁸⁶ Throughout the concise essay that forms the book’s introductory section, Ecke made numerous comparisons between the visual and structural likeness of different furniture types and vernacular architectural forms; alcove beds, couches and platforms are described and inferred as an extension of the built spaces which they occupy.⁸⁷ The bibliography of *Chinese Domestic Furniture* referenced an article written in 1929 by Vilhelm Slomann (1885-1962); then the director of the Design Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen, considering the links between Chinese and English furniture design. The article drew recurrent comparisons between developments in English architecture and furniture motifs and construction

⁸⁴ Su Gin-Djih, *Chinese Architecture: Past and Contemporary*. Hong Kong: The Sin Poh Amalgamated (H.K.) Ltd. 1964. 130-131.

⁸⁵ Su Gin-Djih, *Chinese Architecture*. 131-133.

⁸⁶ Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 1.

⁸⁷ For example, in describing a couch featured in *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, Ecke wrote: “This platform has remained in principle part of the house construction, preserving the original frame and panel device unaltered; the couch, after evolving over twenty-five centuries, has become in itself a piece of architecture”. Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 7.

indicating that the phenomenon of cross pollination in design ideology between the disciplines of architectural and furniture construction was not restricted to Chinese furniture. Slomann submitted however that the affinity between English furniture and architectural elements existed primarily in surface design motifs derived from the classical order, such as acanthus leaves, rather than in constructional elements which he pointed to as a feature specific to Chinese cabinetry. In addition, he noted that after the Chippendale period (c.1750-1790) which famously absorbed the stylistic forms of furniture imported from Canton, furniture design in England eschewed Chinese motifs and veered back towards the neo-classical, whereas Chinese furniture continued to directly articulate endemic architectonic designs on a scale relevant to interior use.⁸⁸

Additional evidence for the close interlinkage between the study of Chinese architecture and furniture comes from the writers and proponents of Chinese furniture themselves. Wang Shixiang, often regarded as the foremost expert on Chinese furniture, was a research fellow of the Society for Research in Chinese Architecture (“SRCA”) from 1943-45.⁸⁹ Ecke, whose book *Chinese Domestic Furniture* is distinguished as the first book published in any language to focus on Chinese hardwood furniture, was also an active member of the SRCA and wrote several papers for the Society’s Bulletin.⁹⁰ The line drawings in Ecke’s book were executed by Professor Yang Yao who is widely recognised as an architectural draughtsman and graphic artist, but who was in fact a trained architect, an academic and a keen proponent and researcher of Chinese furniture whose own contribution to the written history of Chinese ‘classic’ furniture will be considered later in this study as the first Chinese publication on the subject. He was employed as Associate Professor at Peking University from 1944 and was later Chief Architect at the Beijing Industrial Architectural Design Institute.⁹¹ A central proposition of this thesis is that the close connection between Ecke, Wang Shixiang and others engaged in the SRCA fomented a narrow but axiomatic perspective on Chinese “classic” furniture which commenced during

⁸⁸ Vilhelm Slomann, “Chinesische Möbel des 18. Jahrhunderts” [“Chinese Furniture of the Eighteenth Century”], *Pantheon*, no. 3 (1929): 142-148.

⁸⁹ Wang Shixiang. *Classic Chinese Furniture*, 324-325.

⁹⁰ In his 1972 obituary of Ecke; the sinologist Paul Demiéville stated: “He was particularly interested in architecture, having been a member of the Chinese Society for Research in Chinese Architecture [sic] and wrote two instructive essays on ancient stone buildings in Fukien.” P. Demiéville, “Gustav Ecke, 1896-1971.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 92, no. 3 (1972): 470-471. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/600574>.

⁹¹ In the acknowledgements section of *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, Ecke described Yang as “an artist and a draftsman of genius” but did not acknowledge his role in the architectural profession. Whilst there is no evidence that Yang was a member of the SRCA it is likely that he will have been familiar with its work and perspectives of its members.

this period and perpetuated throughout the relevant literature, continuing to inform current collecting ideologies and values.

3. The inception of a Western historiography of Chinese ‘classic’ furniture

The Western historiography of Chinese Ming and early Qing hardwood furniture is defined by the attachment of the designation ‘classic’ or ‘classical’, ascribed by twentieth century scholars to distinguish a specific and desirable furniture aesthetic segregating a particular group of furniture from pieces constructed in a style considered less favourable by the early mid-century. Although it is widely thought that the use of the designation classic originates from a speech given by Laurence Sickman in 1978, in actuality the application of this terminology to describe the hardwood furniture collected by early proponents in Beijing is first found in a pamphlet written by Laurence Sickman, then Director of what is now the NAMA in Kansas City, entitled “Chinese Domestic Furniture: A New Gallery Opened 17 November 1966,” published by the Gallery on the occasion of the opening of the Chinese furniture and decorative arts galleries.⁹²

The 1966 pamphlet contained the following lines: “The Gallery owns some forty pieces of what we have called the classic type... the most recent group, including the well-known tester bed formerly in the collection of Sydney Cooper, was acquired from the collection of James P. Speer.”⁹³ An unpublished draft for the pamphlet made further distinction between ‘classic’ furniture and that associated with late Qing imperial style. A note in the draft not published in the final version of the pamphlet reads: “The “palace style” has its own particular aesthetic merits but within quite a different category than that of the furniture described here.”⁹⁴ Sickman later explained his use of the word classic to describe Chinese furniture in a lecture to the Oriental Ceramic Society in 1978:

“The term “classic” seems appropriate to describe traditional Chinese furniture because its structure descends directly from ancient times, and primarily because

⁹² Laurence Sickman, *Chinese Domestic Furniture: A New Gallery Opened 17 November 1966*. Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Archives. MS001 Laurence Sickman Papers V Scholarly Activities Box 33a: Folder 21.

⁹³ Sickman, *Chinese Domestic Furniture: A New Gallery*.

⁹⁴ Laurence Sickman, unpublished draft manuscript. Nelson Gallery of Art. Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Archives. MS001 Laurence Sickman Papers V Scholarly Activities Box 33a: Folder 21.

it possesses the qualities of restraint, balance, clarity, and grandeur that we associate with a classic style in any medium or culture.”⁹⁵

Whilst, as shown above, the ‘classic’ designation was a later development, the process of distinguishing and identifying a select group of furniture items meeting the required aesthetic particularisation is widely considered to begin with two seminal works written by Western authors on the subject published in the mid and late 1940s. The first of these works, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, written by the German academic Gustav Ecke, was initially published in a first edition collectors’ format by the French bookseller and publisher Henri Vetch in Beijing in 1944 in a short run of 200 copies. The second, George Kates’ *Chinese Household Furniture*, was published in 1948 by Harper and Brothers in New York and by Dover Publications in London. Both of these books came to being in what has been popularly represented as the rather romantic, nostalgic period of the Republican era between the waning of the Qing dynasty and the Japanese invasion of Beijing in 1937; and prior to the establishment of Mao Zedong’s PRC in 1949.⁹⁶ Neither Ecke or Kates identified themselves as experts in Chinese hardwood furniture and both works present as self-fulfilling projects rather than as part of a wider academic body of research on the subject. Both men were academically well-qualified to produce written commentaries on the subject of Chinese furniture which, befitting the nature of many of these objects for use in intimate domestic settings, appear to have been a matter of private, rather than professional, interest for both writers originating from the acquisition of furniture items for personal use.⁹⁷ Kates’ and Ecke’s own collecting activities which will be considered in greater detail further in this study were foundational and are inextricably connected to the inception of their published works which in essence comprise a record of acquisition activity by the authors and their associates at a beneficial historical juncture in which political, economic and cultural circumstances were opportunely combined.

A number of earlier European publications exist, however, which predate Ecke and Kates’ works that merit examination with relevance to wider shifts in aesthetic ideologies

⁹⁵ Laurence Sickman, “Classic Chinese Furniture” *Journal of the Classical Chinese Furniture Society*, Spring 1994, Vol.4 No.2. 15-69. 56.

⁹⁶ This representation is perpetuated in the reminiscences of Westerners present in China at the time who later left in the wake of political instability, either at the time of the first Japanese incursion in the North of China in 1931 or the second invasion in 1937 which extended south to Beijing and Shanghai. Such works include Kate’s *The Years That Were Fat*. George N. Kates, *The Years That Were Fat: Peking, 1933-1940*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1952 (1988 Reprint).

⁹⁷ Unlike contemporaries such as Otto Burchard, William and Robert Drummond and Laurence Sickman, Ecke and Kates did not act either in a commercial capacity as art dealers or in serve as buying agents for Museums in the West seeking to establish or expand collections of oriental art.

represented by the global Modernist movement as a departure point for the later evolution of the classical designation in the collecting of Chinese furniture. Whilst these earlier texts are few in number and contain limited and sometimes unreliable art historical information, they serve as evidence for the increasing circulation and appreciation of Chinese furniture (albeit in the context of earlier tastes in Chinese and East Asian art) and are therefore illuminative in charting a transformative evolution in taste and knowledge. Through reference to these earlier books, it is possible to demonstrate that in Western centres of pan-Asian art collecting and trade, the reception of Chinese furniture which continued to favour ornate and decorative lacquered surfaces, had remained virtually constant since the time of Juan González de Mendoza. Laurence Sickman commented that this type of furniture had “set the taste for things Chinese... in the 19th century, heavily carved, ornate pieces frequently inlaid with mother-of-pearl, had appeal for the Victorian era [and] was, indeed, the Chinese counterpart of Victorian taste.”⁹⁸ A late Qing carved and inlaid table in the Guangdong Provincial Museum and unusually decorated with the name of the manufacturer in mother-of-pearl which reads *Nan Sheng Long Xao* 南盛隆造 (Made by Nan Sheng Long) exemplifies this type of furniture. (Figure 1.2) Early signs of a movement towards the recognition of a more austere type of hardwood furniture are discernible in the short form textual introductions which accompanied the plates in these earlier European books.

In 1922 *Les Meubles de la Chine; cinquante-quatre planches accompagnées d'une préface et d'une table descriptive* (Chinese Furniture; fifty-four plates accompanied by a preface and a descriptive table) was published in Paris by the French antiquarian and art dealer, Odilon Roche (1868-1947).⁹⁹ This was followed by a translation of the book in English by the British architect, antiquarian and furniture expert Herbert Cescinsky (1875-1947).¹⁰⁰ Both books contain 54 colour plates depicting 59 items of furniture, the greater proportion of objects being larger items such as cupboards and tables. In 1926 a further edition of Roche's book containing 54 plates from a number of European collections was published by Maurice Dupont (n.d.) in French.¹⁰¹ These early written works are often dismissed by later historians of Chinese furniture as remnants of a past taste for overtly decorative items, particularly as the focus of later collecting practices are oriented almost exclusively toward Chinese hardwood furniture, as has been the case from the mid-twentieth

⁹⁸ Sickman, *Chinese Domestic Furniture: A New Gallery Opened 17 November 1966*, unpaginated.

⁹⁹ Odilon Roche. 1922. *Les Meubles de la Chine: Cinquante-quatre planches accompagnées d'une préface et d'une table descriptive*. Paris: Librairie des Arts Décoratifs.

¹⁰⁰ Herbert Cescinsky. 1922. *Chinese Furniture: A Series of Examples from Collections in France; with Fifty-Four Collotype Plates and Ten Half-Tones*. London: Benn Brothers.

¹⁰¹ Maurice Dupont. 1926. *Les Meubles de la Chine, Série 2: Cinquante-quatre planches accompagnées d'une préface et d'une table descriptive*. Paris: Librairie des Arts Décoratifs, 1926.

century onwards. According to Handler: “For Odilon Roche, the author of the first book on Chinese furniture (*Les Meubles de la Chine*, published in 1922), lacquered furniture was the furniture of China”.¹⁰²

Handler’s brief analysis does not accurately reflect the content of Roche’s concise introductory essay and little has been written about how Roche’s book interlocks with the later historiography of Chinese furniture. As the taste for Chinese furniture and historical Chinese art objects more widely metamorphosed from the ornate to the linear and sparingly adorned, *Les Meubles de la Chine* became regarded as a vestige from an era when an excess of decoration and Chinoiserie were in vogue. In addition to emphasising concepts and conflicts of taste, Roche and Cescinsky’s publications serve to confer valuable insight into the development of knowledge and connoisseurship in Chinese furniture. In addition to defining Western collectors and collecting practices, both publications provide a critical axis between the taste of elite European collectors in the earliest decades of the twentieth century for decorated Chinese furniture, and the collecting activities and enthusiasm of early Western residents in Beijing for plain hardwood furniture which would be documented in the following decades.

The descriptive labels attached to individual items in the book suggest that Roche’s knowledge of Chinese furniture was less than expert and that the items themselves had been recast within the context of the receiving culture. For example, a Qing dynasty throne is described as a *grand fauteuil* (large armchair). (Figure 1.3). A more accurate designation in French might have been *trône* though as Craig Clunas points out, the concept and interpretation of imperial thrones, as they existed in Qing dynasty China, is very different from the Western notion of a unique item of furniture symbolising absolute monarchic power: multiple thrones existed in the imperial palaces as items for ritual or daily use.¹⁰³ Incense stands are described as *consoles* rather than the more culturally and functionally correct *stand d'encens*; a misdescription which may be attributable to the cabriolet legs of the classic Chinese incense stand which are similar in appearance to the curved legs of traditional French console tables. (Figure 1.4) The focus however, was primarily superficial rather than historical: there was no attempt to chart a social or material history of these objects which had already been absorbed into a cultural schema consistent with the occidental values of their collectors. An article written in 1925 by Marcel Weber, entitled

¹⁰² Emphasis added. Sarah Handler, *Austere Luminosity*, 29.

¹⁰³ Craig Clunas, “Whose Throne is it Anyway? The Qianlong Throne in the T.T. Tsui Gallery.” in *Chinese Furniture, Selected Articles from Orientations 1984-1999*. Orientations: Hong Kong. 1999. 76-79. See page 79.

“Les Laques et des Meubles de la Chine” provided a short technical summary of the application methods of decorative lacquer techniques but is notable for its insight into the attitude of French consumers and craftsmen towards Chinese lacquered furniture, noting that the furniture imported from China was often deconstructed, with lacquered panels applied into other furniture with more decorative European outlines: “Our cabinetmakers, the Dubois, the Delormes, the Weissweiler wanted scalloped shapes and to date they have cut up the panels they received from China to make dresser fronts or cabinets.”¹⁰⁴

This form of unmediated subliminal cultural and social recasting of objectival identities commutes with ethnological theories of reinterpretation and acculturation espoused by anthropologists such as Erika Bourguignon, Melville J. Herskovits and John Hamer.¹⁰⁵ Whilst predicated largely on intangible cultural practices and rituals within sub-Saharan societies, these anthropological doctrines, which observed and sought to explicate the reinterpretation of extrinsic heritage and custom by dominant cultures, can also be applied to the use and assimilation or “approximation” of objects between cultures. The resulting syncretistic phenomenon is described by Bourguignon as a coalescence of preexisting and novel cultural materials to form a new series of cultural elements (“a new cultural amalgam”) in which some of the original materials may remain unchanged.¹⁰⁶

The fact that these early anthropological theories examining cultural metamorphosis developed contemporaneously with the increased international transfer of objects between globalised societies appeared from the late nineteenth century onwards, underlines the inherent necessity of delineating a post-colonial logic through which to interpret forms of cultural exchange. Similarly, this emergent field of theory and research as a rationalising lens through which to interpret the flow of ethnological artefacts between continents and their absorption into a dominant receiving culture presents a theoretical framework through which to understand the reconstruction of the objectival identities, relevant to Chinese imperial furniture recast in a late 19th Century Western decorative context.¹⁰⁷ The American anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits, credited with developing though not instigating the

¹⁰⁴ Marcel Weber, “Les Laques et des Meubles de la Chine.” *Revue Des Arts Asiatiques* 2, no. 1 (1925): 19-23. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43475259>. Referenced in Ecke’s “Wandlungen des Faltstuhls,” 1944.

¹⁰⁵ For further discussion on cultural reinvention see Erika Bourguignon (1954). “Reinterpretation and the Mechanisms of Culture Change. *Ohio Journal of Science* 54, 329-334; Melville J. Herskovits, 1938, *Acculturation: The Study of Cultural Contact*. New York, J. J. Augustin publisher and John H Hamer. “Identity, Process, and Reinterpretation”. *The Past Made Present and the Present Made Past.* *Anthropos* 89, no. 1/3 (1994): 181-90. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40463850>.

¹⁰⁶ Erika Bourguignon, “Reinterpretation and the Mechanisms of Culture Change,” 329.

¹⁰⁷ Bert Becker’s article testifies to the importance of the advent of steam ships in precipitating economic exchange and the opening of Chinese and East Asian markets at the end of the eighteenth century. Becker, Bert. “Coastal Shipping in East Asia in the Late Nineteenth Century.” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch* 50 (2010): 245-302. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23891206>. 21.

theory of cultural relativism, based his studies of acculturation on time spent in South and East Africa. On the acculturation of objects and the significance and theoretical implications of terminologies such “assimilation” and “diffusion” in relation to the ethnographical movement and exchange of migratory populations in a manner which may also be extended to the artefacts of cultural contact and exchange: Herskovits submitted that “all aspects of culture are interrelated.”¹⁰⁸ Extending these social and ethnographic anthropological doctrines on the migration of populations to the transfer to the movement of objects formed a logical progression for later anthropological practitioners. Studies of this nature tended to focus on objects from Africa and the North and South American continents. However, the ideologies espoused by these early anthropologists may equally be applied to the global circulation of Chinese artefacts and their cultural assimilation notwithstanding the specific power structures that characterised these different geopolitical relationships.

Analysis of the collections from which the items featured in *Les Meubles de Chine* derived provides further insight. Of the 59 pieces illustrated in the book, nineteen pieces are from Roche’s own collection; two belonged to Charles Vignier (1863-1934); five to the collection of Edgar Worch (1880-1972), seven to Léon Wannieck (1875-1954); eight are attributed to “MM. Loo et Cie”; six to “La Compagnie Chinoise Tonying” (Tonying & Company); seven to Paul Mallon (1884-1975) and six to John S.T. Audley (n.d.). All of the collectors mentioned were those of professional pan-Asian art dealers based variously in Paris (Vignier, Wannieck, C.T. Loo, Ton-Ying Company and Mallon); Berlin (Worch) and London (Audley). In all cases, Chinese porcelain, sculpture and higher value art objects from the Middle and Near East rather than furniture were the primary items of trade. For example, George Salles’ (1889-1966) obituary of Charles Vignier records that he dealt in an eclectic variety of objects including “Persian miniatures, all the variety of oriental pottery, stones, bronzes, silverware, ceramics and paintings from China, sculptures from India [and] variegated archaeological objects unearthed in Syria and Mesopotamia.”¹⁰⁹ This illustrious circle of collectors and dealers demonstrates Roche’s connections and position in the European artistic coterie.

Roche is known to have been a dealer in East Asian art and antiques, although after his death in 1952 he became more widely regarded as a watercolour artist. According to

¹⁰⁸ Melville J. Herskovits, *Acculturation: The Study of Cultural Contact* (New York: J. J. Augustin Publisher, 1938), 12-21. May 21 May 2020. <https://archive.org/details/acculturationstu00hers/page/2/mode/2up>.

¹⁰⁹ Salles was a French art historian and curator who served as curator of Asian Arts at the Louvre and Director of the Guimet Museum in Paris. Georges Salles. “Charles Vignier.” *Revue Des Arts Asiatiques* 8, no. 2 (1934): 104-6. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43475535>. As may be expected, there is no mention in Salles’ obituary of any specialism in furniture. Vignier is also known to have sold African sculptures to the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

Bénézit's *Dictionnaire des Peintres, Sculpteurs, Dessinateurs et Graveurs*, in 1905 Roche was "the first in Paris to sell Chinese antiques."¹¹⁰ Roche appears to have supplied an illustrious, somewhat avant-garde clientele: the same source states that the fashion designer Coco Chanel (1883-1971) and the novelist Colette (1873-1954) were among his patrons. There is no evidence to suggest that Roche travelled to China and it is reasonable to extrapolate that his appreciation of Chinese furniture was principally aesthetic rather than sinological. Michael St. Clair notes that Ton-Ying and Company, whose collection was represented in Roche's book, was established by Zhang Renjie, scion of a wealthy and well-connected Chinese family, who had access to high quality furniture items which he supplied to British (and presumably also Parisian) dealers. It is conceivable that dealers such as Zhang were a source of inventory for Roche.¹¹¹ Roche's commercial activities may be considered in the light of Langdon Warner's (1881-1955) 1913 correspondence to the American collector Charles Freer regarding the prominent role that Parisian antique dealers played in the circulation of Chinese art and antiques: "I was astonished to find what you must already know, that is their superiority over [dealers] in London and New York and even over the greater number of Museums."¹¹²

Roche referred to Chinese domestic ("*utilitaire*") furniture as the most recent of revelations in Chinese art, indicating that an element of novelty, discovery and exoticism lay behind this recent discovery:

"It is only in the last ten years that Parisian collectors have known to recognize an interest in Chinese domestic furniture and gradually bring together the most remarkable specimens. For the first time, we will find [in this book] a complete collection."¹¹³

The introductory pages of *Les Meubles de la Chine* are an ebullient testimony to Roche's ocular and sensualistic appreciation of Chinese lacquered furniture. Notwithstanding his predilection for the painted surface, Roche was clearly aware of the variety of finishes applied to Chinese furniture and was familiar not only with decorated furniture. His Introduction lists a range of possible surface treatments, ranging from the opulent and

¹¹⁰ Emmanuel Bénézit. 1905. 2006 Reprint. *Benezit Dictionary of Artists*. Paris, Editions Gründ.

¹¹¹ Michael St Clair. 2016. *The Great Chinese Art Transfer*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press. 110.

¹¹² Langdon Warner to Charles Lang Freer, July 17, 1913, Langdon Warner additional papers (66M-193), box 6, Houghton Library, Harvard University. Cited in Ian K.Y. Shin. *Making "Chinese Art": Knowledge and Authority in the Transpacific Progressive Era*. Doctoral thesis, Columbia University. 2016. Accessed 08 November 2018. <https://doi.org/10.7916/D8057G23>. 68.

¹¹³ Roche, *Les Meubles de la Chine*, Introduction, unpaginated. Original French text at Appendix 1.

painterly to the simple “*lacque transparent*,” although there are no unadorned pieces featured in the book: “Sometimes also the decor is absent, and the furniture draws all the beauty of the warm and deep tone and dark glow of its smooth surfaces.”¹¹⁴

This sentiment would undoubtedly have been shared by later writers and proponents of classical Chinese furniture. However, Roche’s statement that Chinese furniture was “rarely in bare wood” and typically coated with red or black coloured lacquer to guard against humidity is excessive in its generalisation and may indicate experience of handling a limited number of examples.¹¹⁵ This would be particularly the case if, as hypothesised, he had not travelled to China and was acquainted principally with the imported prestigious and highly decorative pieces deemed worthy of an elite Parisian audience.

Although a number of the furniture examples featured in the plates are in the more flamboyant late Qing style, many of the catalogued items illustrated in *Les Meubles de la Chine* combined decorative surfaces with the simplified and uncluttered forms which have come to be regarded as ‘classic’; although they are not constructed in plain hardwood. Roche made no attempt at dating or further discourse relevant to the use or application of materials. In evidence throughout the introductory text, however, is an appreciation of the contrast between the luxurious lacquered and painted finishes which Roche so admired and the simple outline of the majority of pieces illustrated in the book, such as a black lacquered imperial recessed-leg table belonging to Roche in the classical style with polychrome decoration. (Figure 1.5) In common with later connoisseurs and authors, throughout his written introduction Roche made constant reference to simplicity of form as an intrinsic virtue of Chinese furniture. Similarly consistent with later writing is the presentation of the books published by Roche, Cescinsky and Dupont in Europe during the period from 1922-1926. All three are presented in catalogue format, featuring pieces from private collections (in Roche’s case, including items from the author’s own collection) with a narrow framework of textual remarks serving as an introduction. Although Ecke is often cited as setting a precedent for this format relevant to books on Chinese furniture, the inventory-like arrangement of plates preceded by a relatively concise written introduction may be traced to these earlier authors and even to commercial catalogues showing Chinese furniture styles

¹¹⁴ Roche, *Les Meubles de la Chine*, unpaginated. Original text: “Parfois aussi le décor est absent, et le meuble tire toute la beauté du ton chaud et profond et du sombre éclat de ses surfaces lisse.”

¹¹⁵ Roche, *Les Meubles de la Chine*, unpaginated.

available for purchase by retail consumers.¹¹⁶ (See, for example, Figure 1.6 which dates to c.1900.)

4. From European centres of East Asian art to China at first hand

Pursuant to these early publications, the Western narrative on Chinese furniture shifted from an exclusively European interpretation to a Western perspective informed by the first-hand experience of Chinese furniture in use in China. John Calvin Ferguson (1866-1945) dedicated a section to furniture in his influential book *Survey of Chinese Art*, published in 1939.¹¹⁷ Seven pages of the first edition focused on the subject of furniture and the book also included illustrations of a number of pieces both from the author's own and from other collections. Ferguson initiated the inception of a more scholarly approach to the subject matter and on hardwood furniture. The furniture section in the *Survey* attempted for the first time in the Western literature to provide a chronological overview of the development of a Chinese furniture tradition from a cultural perspective, beginning with the earliest related archaeological artefacts and including information on materials and construction methods.¹¹⁸ Although Ferguson's *Survey* placed significantly greater emphasis on the traditional higher art forms of painting, calligraphy and porcelain the fact that furniture was included at all in a book on Chinese art may in itself be considered significant.

Ferguson was generally regarded (with some reservations detailed further in this chapter) as a competent and scholarly sinologist whose wide-ranging interests and occupations included advising the Chinese government; procuring Chinese art objects for the Metropolitan and Cleveland museums; academic teaching and written publications, in addition to dealing and collecting.¹¹⁹ His approach to the subject of Chinese furniture therefore naturally extended further than superficial aesthetic appreciation. Ferguson had travelled extensively within China and made considerable efforts to learn its culture and

¹¹⁶ Examples of trade catalogues are two volumes apparently published by manufacturers of furniture based in Canton. The first, *Catalogue of Chinese Furniture: Blackwoodware, Man Chuen Oi Ting* published c. 1900; and *Catalogue of Chinese Furniture: Blackwoodware, Ng Sheong*, published by Carlowitz and Co., Canton, 1913.

¹¹⁷ John Calvin Ferguson. 1939. *Survey of Chinese Art*, Shanghai, The Commercial Press Ltd.

¹¹⁸ The chronological treatment of the subject matter is in keeping with the rather ambitious objective stated in Ferguson's preface to the chapter on Furniture which was also published separately as a standalone volume. Ferguson states that [In] "the Survey of Chinese Art... all available material for the study of the various phases of the subject has been collected". Preface to Chapter 7 on Furniture. Ferguson, *Survey of Chinese Art*. 109-115.

¹¹⁹ See Lara Jaishree Netting. 2013. *A Perpetual Fire: John C. Ferguson and his quest for Chinese art and culture*. Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong.

language. For the first time, the publication included information and illustrations of plainly finished hardwood examples with transparent lacquer emphasising the wood grain, alongside coloured lacquered furniture. Ferguson's description of the furniture items as "simple and severe" provides early textual evidence of the taste for what was later known as 'classic' Chinese furniture, although the book predates the inception and use of the term.¹²⁰

Perhaps for the first time in Western literature, *zitan* and *huali* woods were singled out as being the most distinguished and highly prized of the Chinese furniture woods:

The most highly prized wood for making furniture is that of several varieties of blackwood from the *dalbergia* family called *tzŭ-tan* [*zitan*]... Rosewood, *hua-li mu* [*hualimu*] is a variety of *dalbergia* trees less valuable than *tzŭ-tan* [*zitan*] and therefore more commonly found in furniture. Any article made in these two woods is considered as good quality.¹²¹

Ferguson was comprehensive in his coverage of wood types and did not confine his attention only to elite materials. He described furniture made from hardwood (硬木, *ying mu*); cedar (楠木, *nanmu*); various types of bamboo, camphor wood, catalpa and common pine (杉木, *shan mu*); the latter described as "in general use for furniture making."¹²² *Nanmu* 楠木 is an important indigenous species of wood, for which Walter Cheah has provided the following description: "*Nanmu* is a softwood. It has a pleasant, light even colour and it seldom expands or contracts. Being one of the best softwoods, it was often used in combination with a hardwood."¹²³ Ferguson also made reference to a type of wood named "*tou-pai nanmu*", from Sichuan, which he describes as highly figured, citing a particular example with grape-like patterns. There is no other known reference to *tou-pai nanmu* and as no Chinese characters are given it is likely that this reference is a misrepresentation of colloquially derived information. The description of a grape-like pattern usually refers to burlwood (櫻木, *yingmu*). Ferguson's few observations regarding the uses of particular types of wood for different circumstances - for example, camphor wood for cupboards and chests for textiles; spotted bamboo for summer furniture - demonstrate his observation at first hand of the use of furniture in Chinese residences (both domestic and imperial) and indicate some attempt

¹²⁰ Ferguson, *Survey*, 109.

¹²¹ Ferguson, *Survey*, 112.

¹²² Ferguson, *Survey*, 112. Ferguson did not include Chinese characters.

¹²³ Walter Cheah. "Chinese Furniture." *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 67, no. 1 (266) (1994): 69-80. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41493242>.

at placing the subject matter within an original social and cultural framework. The use of paintings as a source material for the study of Chinese furniture is further alluded to; Ferguson references paintings as the principal source of knowledge about the chronological sequencing of furniture designs through which to facilitate some concept of dating.¹²⁴ Despite the limitations of the text, Chinese furniture - in particular hardwood domestic furniture - was for the first time in the historiography placed within the context of art and elevated to the domain of scholarly discourse.

A number of inaccuracies can be identified in the text and in the attribution of furniture objects: Ferguson's writing has in general been critiqued as "naive" in the light of later scholarship and is noted to have contained "inexplicable mistakes" and this is certainly the case in his brief writing on furniture.¹²⁵ Deficiencies in his scholarship were noted by contemporaries and later observers.¹²⁶ Textual inaccuracies related to furniture extend to the suggestion that "lacquered furniture is highly prized and was in use before redwood and blackwood (assumed to be references to either *huali* or *hongmu* and *zitan*) were introduced to China in the wake of the conquest of Annam"; when in fact lacquered and hardwood furniture continued to be produced concurrently throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties; in the case of *huali* in particular, this statement disregards the existence of an indigenous supply. The two materials (hardwood and lacquer) were not mutually exclusive, and lacquering of furniture did not cease when, as Ferguson suggested, particular species of highly prized hardwood became popular and available as a result of increased volume of timber tributes made in the Ming dynasty. Of particular note is an early pottery table from Ferguson's own collection which appears to be funerary tomb ware. It is described as formerly being in the collection of Tuan-fang (Duanfang) 端方 (1861-1911) and having four detachable mounts in the form of animal legs. (Figure 1.7).

Despite these textual inconsistencies and commensurate with Ferguson's stated intention to create a comprehensive outline of Chinese art, the *Survey* occupies a non-discriminatory space between Roche's 1922 book showing ornate furniture pieces and the sleek hardwood styles that would come to dominate following the publication of Ecke's

¹²⁴ Ferguson, *Survey*, 110.

¹²⁵ Thomas Lawton has commented on some of the gaps and inaccuracies in Ferguson's research noting that Ferguson himself did not consider the research and state of knowledge on Chinese art to be sufficiently advanced. Thomas Lawton. "John C. Ferguson: A Fellow Feeling of Fallibility" *Orientalism* 27 (1996) 65-76.

¹²⁶ George Ernest Morrison, then correspondent for the Times in Beijing commented of Ferguson: "[He] affects the passion of knowledge more than most men. Unquestionably he has had the opportunity of learning and seeing much, but he is essentially untruthful and unscrupulous and thick-skinned as a rhinoceros." Cited in Lo Hui-Min. 2013. *The Correspondence of G. E. Morrison 1912-1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 19.

Chinese Domestic Furniture five years later in 1944. The hardwood pieces selected by Ferguson do not all subscribe to the austere stylistic and aesthetic tendencies of the type of furniture later designated as ‘classic’ by Western writers. It is evident that Ferguson encountered a broad spectrum of furniture styles in use at first hand in both Chinese and expatriate domestic settings during the quarter century he spent living in China. Illustrated pieces included a classic Ming bamboo style corner leg table with humpback stretchers, incorrectly described as a lute table, also in Ferguson’s collection. (Figure 1.8) Displaying a differentiated and highly decorative aesthetic, another image shows Qing throne chairs flanked by accompanying incense stands and with screens set behind in the traditional manner. (Figure 1.9) Whilst the painting table complies with the later-derived ‘classic’ designation the throne chairs would probably be eschewed by later audiences and writers representing an earlier, outmoded taste.

Ferguson’s familiarity and links with the former Qing official class and with furniture in the traditional courtyard home setting is evidenced in photographs shown in the *Survey of Chinese Art* depicting a room in the home of Kuo Pao-ch'ang (Guo Baochang) 郭葆昌 (1879-1942), with whom Ferguson worked for a number of years at the Palace Museum. According to Ellen Huang, as a leading collector and noted porcelain expert, Guo Baochang was appointed Superintendent of Ceramics at the Palace Museum by Yuan Shikai 袁世凯 (1859-1916), second provisional President of the Republic of China from 1912-1916. Huang states that Ferguson and Guo worked together at the Palace Museum in the early 1920s.¹²⁷ The photograph at Figure 1.10 reveals an elegant display of Chinese painting, porcelain and floor rugs in combination with austere hardwood furniture set within a traditional courtyard residence interior, no doubt similar to the one that Ferguson and many of his Western counterparts in Beijing elected to occupy. Guo was a respected porcelain expert and a collector and dealer in Chinese art who collaborated with Ferguson on a book on Chinese porcelain, *Noted Porcelains of Successive Dynasties with Comments and Illustrations*, published in 1931.¹²⁸

As Jerome Silbergeld has commented, “John Ferguson was perhaps the first of those writing on Chinese painting to live in China and become personally familiar with the Chinese

¹²⁷ See Ellen Huang, “There and Back Again: Material Objects at the First International Exhibitions of Chinese Art in Shanghai, London and Nanjing” in ed. Vimalin Rujivacharakul. 2011. *Collecting China: The World, China, and a History of Collecting*. Newark: University of Delaware Press. 148.

¹²⁸ Netting, *A Perpetual Fire*. 118. Referring to John C. Ferguson and Kuo Pao-Ch'ang. 1931. *Noted Porcelains of Successive Dynasties, with Comments and Illustrations by Hsiang Yuan-Pien*. Peiping: Chi Chai Publishing Company.

scholar-painters and their values.”¹²⁹ After the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1912 Ferguson was the only non-Chinese expert appointed to the committee responsible for the inspection and inventory of the imperial art collection. These details attest to the access Ferguson was afforded through his reputation and connections in China to both the imperial collections and also to established collections and collectors. From this perspective it is not surprising that Ferguson’s tastes as expressed through the selection of objects in the *Survey of Chinese Art* reflected an endemic rather than Westernised aesthetic inclination. Seemingly, as will be discussed further in this study, for those living in Beijing at this time with an interest in Chinese art and culture, the acquisition of vernacular furniture which subscribed to the simple but refined taste of local collectors and scholars and which complemented their traditional *hutong* dwellings whilst providing a harmonious backdrop for their collections of Chinese art, was an obvious choice. As a result of individual collecting activity, Chinese furniture, which was initially construed as a complementary but ancillary backdrop to higher forms of Chinese art such as painting, calligraphy and porcelain, became the subject of considered investigation and further study.

5. Western monographs of the 1940s: Gustav Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*

The 1940s were a watershed moment in both the development of the Western historiography of Chinese furniture and in the concomitant perception of stylistically restrained hardwood furniture as an expression of fine art. During this period both Ecke and Kates published books focusing solely on Chinese antique hardwood furniture. Ferguson’s chapter on furniture in his *Survey*, as well as the earlier books by Roche and Cescinsky are cited in Ecke’s bibliography.¹³⁰ Ecke’s monograph, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, departed from these antecedent works by placing Chinese furniture within a more scholarly framework, referencing other forms of Chinese art such as bronzes in an attempt to chronologically trace the stylistic and humanistic development of Chinese furniture over time. Ecke cited the box construction of an 11th century BCE bronze table from the Duanfang collection as modelled on a “wooden contrivance”, describing it as “the foremost example of a platform construction with the box design, one of the two primary patterns for the

¹²⁹ Jerome Silbergeld. “The Evolution of a ‘Revolution’: Unsettled Reflections on the Chinese Art-Historical Mission.” *Archives of Asian Art* 55 (2005): 39-52. 44. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20111327>.

¹³⁰ Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 36. Also included in Ecke’s bibliography is *Les Meubles de la Chine*, Maurice Dupont’s 1926 sequel to Roche’s book under the same title.

construction of Chinese furniture”, though lacking the detail of joinery from the wooden original.¹³¹ (Figure 11a and b). The reference to this object which Ecke described as a “tray” is significant as it passed through the hands of John Ferguson, who purchased a collection of bronzes from the family of Duanfang, a noted Qing government official and art collector, which he then sold to the Metropolitan Museum in New York.¹³² This item is in fact more accurately described as a ritual altar table of which two types are recorded; one for offering of meat (礼俎, *lizu*) and the other for sacrificial wine (禁, *jin*). These are recorded in the *Sanlitu jizhu* 三礼图集注 (Collected commentaries on the Illustrations to Three Ritual Classics) significant as first Chinese record of furniture still in existence although copied during the Song dynasty.¹³³ The altar table represented in *Chinese Domestic Furniture* is now on display in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (MMA) as part of a bronze altar set.¹³⁴ Ferguson also began his section on Furniture from the *Survey* with the words: “The earliest piece of Chinese furniture of which we have any knowledge is a bronze table (禁 *chin*). This had no legs, its four solid sides rested on the ground.”¹³⁵ Given this description, it is evident that Ferguson and Ecke were describing the same item. (Figure 1.11a)

The use of the word ‘domestic’ in the title of Ecke’s publication served to distinguish its content from the imperial-style furniture which had dominated the earlier books dedicated to the subject by Roche, Cescinsky and Dupont. Ecke had previously authored a number of articles on Chinese architecture and in 1944, the year in which *Chinese Domestic Furniture* was published, separately published an article on the development of the folding chair in China and its reverberative effect on Eurasian chair design.¹³⁶ Ecke’s article on early Chinese folding chairs, “Wandlungen des Faltstuhls, Bemerkungen zur Geschichte der Eurasischen Stuhlform” (Transformation of the Folding chair: Remarks on the History of the Eurasian

¹³¹ Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 3.

¹³² This transaction is described in Netting, *A Perpetual Fire*, 136-137.

¹³³ The *Sanlitu jizhu* 三禮圖集注 was compiled by the Song dynasty scholar Nie Chongyi 聶崇義 (10th century, n.d.). *Xin ding san li tu* 新定三礼图 was recompiled in the Kangxi period of the Qing dynasty. Qing Kangxi 12th year [1673; publisher Tong zhi tang 通志堂]. National Library of China, Harvard-Yenching Library Chinese rare book digitization project, Harvard University, *Tong zhi tang jing jie*. 329-330, online version. <https://curiosity.lib.harvard.edu/chinese-rare-books/catalog/49-990080845170203941>

¹³⁴ Altar Set. Shang dynasty, Western Zhou dynasty (1046-771 BCE), Bronze, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, Accession Number 24.72.1-.14.

¹³⁵ Ferguson, *Survey of Chinese Art*, 109.

¹³⁶ See Gustav Ecke, “The Institute for Research in Chinese Architecture: A Short Summary of the Field Work carried on from Spring 1932 to Spring 1937” *Monumenta Serica*, 2:2, 1936, 448-474, DOI: 10.1080/02549948.1936.11745032. Accessed 3.6.2022. Ecke also published articles on the following subjects: “Architecture of a Memorial Hall, *Zur Architektur der Gedächtnishalle*”; The history and Legend of Kang Ping, *Der Historische und der Legendäre Kang Ping* (1940); Structural Features of the Stone-built Ting Pagoda, A Preliminary Study (1948).

Chair Form) was published in 1944 in *Monumenta Serica* and is referenced in *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, establishing that it was published prior to completion of the book.¹³⁷ Considered alongside each other, the article and book jointly demarcate the beginning of a Westernised art historical approach towards Chinese Ming and early Qing hardwood furniture as a distinct element of Chinese furniture design, evincing a stylistic partitioning separating this classification from the customarily ornate designs of later Qing furniture.¹³⁸

The production of these early Western monographs dedicated to Chinese hardwood furniture precipitated an initial expansion in the historiography which sought to synthesise a narrative comprised of didactic and fragmentary oral, literary, pictorial and objectival sources. Ecke's attempt in *Chinese Domestic Furniture* to chart the stylistic development of furniture form through history, including the distinctive 'horse hoof' leg and bottom frame which he dated to the early Ming dynasty.¹³⁹ Ecke's chronological hypothesis was substantiated by an aggregate "collection" of 122 pieces organised into groupings of furniture types and forms meeting the requirements of the 'classic' designation illustrating the variance of styles and categories. These were grouped first by category (tables, couches, beds, stools, chairs, cabinets, stands and occasional items) and then classified further into subcategories. Exemplifying this approach, a section on chairs is arranged into the following groupings: "Back chairs with Splat-Back and Yoke"; "Armchairs with Splat and Closed Back-frame"; "Armchairs with Splat-back and Circular Rest"; followed by "Armchairs in the Bamboo Style."¹⁴⁰ The detailed construction of a number of examples were further illustrated in structural line drawings executed by Yang Yao, demonstrating their construction and joinery in cross-section. (Figure 1.12) The furniture pieces included in the book demonstrate a comprehensive assemblage of functional furniture and ancillary objects including stands and storage boxes for use in the traditional Chinese domestic settings. *Chinese Domestic Furniture* was distinguished from Ferguson's limited synopsis on furniture in the *Survey* by its singular focus on the study of hardwood items and represented the earliest attempt since the Ming dynasty by a Western writer, or indeed by a post-dynastic author of any nationality, to begin to systematically recognise, classify and group together

¹³⁷ Gustav Ecke, "Wandlungen des Faltstuhls, Bemerkungen zur Geschichte der Eurasischen Stuhlform" ["Transformation of the Folding chair: Remarks on the History of the Eurasian Chair Form"]. *Monumenta Serica* 9 (1944): 34-52. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40726376>. Title translation Helena Fung.

¹³⁸ Ecke's "Wandlungen des Faltstuhls" referenced an article written in 1925 by Marcel Weber, "Les Laques et des Meubles de la Chine." *Revue Des Arts Asiatiques* 2, no. 1 (1925): 19-23. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43475259>. Accessed 14.02.2020.

¹³⁹ Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 5.

¹⁴⁰ Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 14-17.

different types of hardwood furniture, segregating those items deemed to be superlative in a modern context by their inclusion in the plates.

In the most significant departure from previous writing on the subject, Ecke described in both textual form and through architectural style line drawings, not only the exterior appearance of the illustrated items, but also the joinery techniques used in the construction of the furniture pieces featured in the book. Consistent with the architectural focus of Ecke's broader research activity, it is unsurprising that the technical aspects of joinery held as much attraction as the spare, linear aesthetic which drew Ecke and his expatriate contemporaries in Beijing to acquire Ming-style hardwood furniture. The methods of construction characteristic of Chinese furniture permitting items to be fully dismantled for transportation to suit the peripatetic scholar-official lifestyle were described in the following terms:

No wooden pins, unless absolutely necessary; no glue, where it may be avoided; no turning wheresoever - these are the three fundamental rules of the Chinese cabinetmaker.¹⁴¹

Whilst these features of Chinese woodwork are now well established, they were observed and recorded here for the first time in the literature. Ecke noted particularly that the method of shaping Chinese furniture was by carving rather than by turning as in the West. In this he made a connection with sculpture and architecture, elevating the process of manufacture through comparison with higher art forms though in language more apposite to the writing of Dupont and Cescinsky rather than the Chinese context:

“Cabriole legs, club feet and oblique braces are true sculpture, carved without parsimony out of the solid material. The elasticity of the rosewoods made possible... not only intricate and daring joints, but also... slenderness or muscular vigour which are the outstanding features of Chinese structural design.”¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ Ecke also quoted the German art historian Leopold Reidemeister (1900-1987) writing in what appears to be the catalogue of an exhibition held in Berlin in 1932 of South-East Asian art from the collection of Friedrich III, which displayed a highly carved *huanghuali* alcove bed: “The curiosity of the bedstead consists in the fact that no nail has been used in its construction.” Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 28-29.

¹⁴² Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 28.

As noted previously in this chapter, the intrinsic and foundational connection between Chinese architecture and furniture is readily evidenced in Ecke's book: based on an analysis of his earlier literary output it can be argued with relative certainty that architecture provided both the backdrop and the catalyst for his interest in the subject of furniture.¹⁴³ As Laurence Sickman wrote in Ecke's obituary a year after his death in 1971:

It is probable that his study of Chinese wooden architecture and his deep admiration of the early styles, by reason of their structural integrity, directed his attention to classic Chinese furniture.¹⁴⁴

Substantiating this connection between the humanistic disciplines of building and cabinetry, Ecke frequently used architectural language to describe decorative furniture motifs (such as a reference to "the cusped and ogeed arch" on a wooden platform)¹⁴⁵ and the conceptualisation of traditional Chinese furniture as an extension of the built environment is evident. Exemplifying this presupposition, Ecke asserts that... "the couch, after evolving over twenty-five centuries, has become a piece of architecture in itself."¹⁴⁶

Ecke elaborated on Ferguson's statement in the *Survey of Chinese Art* that the best furniture pieces were made in *huali* or *zitan*. Advancing Ferguson's narrative, this was the first time in the still limited Western historiography of Chinese furniture that *huanghuali* with the characters for yellow (黄, *huang*) prefacing those for flower (花, *hua*) and pear (梨, *li*) was identified as a distinct type of wood. By inference of emphasis, Ecke affirmed *huanghuali* as the most superlative of Chinese cabinet woods, setting an enduring precedent which, by extrapolation, would impact collecting practices and market values.¹⁴⁷ The austere and relatively unadorned aesthetic that is inherent in the Chinese 'classical' furniture designation, distinct in Ecke's selection of representative furniture pieces, was for the first time coherently expressed and visually defined in *Chinese Domestic Furniture*. In the introductory text to *Chinese Domestic Furniture* a section entitled "Cabinet Woods",

¹⁴³ Ecke's research interests resulted in several published articles on Chinese architecture published from 1930 which were additional to his work for the SRCA. The earliest of these, published in 1930 was "Atlantes and Caryatides in Chinese Architecture." *Bulletin of the Catholic University of Peking*, No. 7 (1930), 63-102; followed a year later by the publication in the same journal of "Two Ashlar Pagodas at Fu-Ch'ing in Southern Fu-Chien". *Bulletin of the Catholic University of Peking*, No. 8 (1931), 49-66.

¹⁴⁴ Laurence Sickman, "In Memoriam: Gustav Ecke (1896-1971)," *Archives of Asian Art* Vol. 26 (1972): 6-8.

¹⁴⁵ Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 3.

¹⁴⁶ Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 7.

¹⁴⁷ Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 24.

consolidated Ecke's departure from the earlier writing of Roche, Cescinsky, Dupont and Ferguson by identifying and describing a highly selective group of four distinct types of hardwood: *Tzu-t'an* [zitan]; *Hua-li* [huali]; *Hung-mu*; and *Chi-ch'ih-mu* [jichimu]. The rationale for the selection of these four particular woods were vaguely explicated as "the four groups of hardwood that were, and partly still are, employed by the Chinese joiner."¹⁴⁸ Ecke asserted that indigenous varieties of these four woods grew in China but suggested that the majority of the timber used for furniture making was imported concurrently with the Southern expansion of Chinese territory, resonating with Ferguson's own statement. The writing of Rudolph Hommel was cited in evidence:

The climatic conditions in China... make it desirable for the people who can afford it, to have their furniture constructed from wood which can withstand these severe changes. We find therefore that a great variety of hard woods, particularly of native growth but more frequently imported from the tropical regions of South-Eastern Asia, are employed in constructing the furniture of the Chinese house.¹⁴⁹

Hommel's writing signified a clear link between furniture created for affluent Chinese patrons and the use of imported woods. The four wood species selected by Ecke had the enduring effect of dismissing other prominent vernacular woods also used to make finely crafted furniture in the Ming and Qing dynasties including *nanmu*, *tielimu*, *jumu* and lacquered softwood, an omission which reinforces the implicit suggestion that imported woods from South Asia were more desirable than indigenous species. *Zitan* and *huanghuali* remain superlative woods in Western and Chinese collections and are cited as rare and principally imported woods with limited indigenous supply. Although Ecke did not comment directly on the political circumstances surrounding the procurement of exotic imported wood varieties in his introduction, a causative link existed between the relaxation of Ming trading and maritime law which opened China up to foreign trade by permitting imports and an ensuing escalation of artistic tastes reflected in the increased production of fine and applied

¹⁴⁸ Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 21. Stores of *huanghuali* still existed in Chinese government warehouses until recently. For analysis of the political and cultural effects of the expansion of Ming territory into Yunnan and Vietnam see Geoff Wade. "Engaging the South: Ming China and Southeast Asia in the Fifteenth Century." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 51, no. 4 (2008): 578-638. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25165269>.

¹⁴⁹ Cited in Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 21. Rudolf P. Hommel, *China at Work: An Illustrated Record of the Primitive Industries of China's Masses, Whose Life Is Toil, and Thus an Account of Chinese Civilization* (New York, United States of America: John Day Company for the Bucks County Historical Society, 1937). 244-245.

arts including furniture, due not least to the positive effect on the Ming economy of increased trade with foreign nations.¹⁵⁰

A hypothesis evaluated in this thesis is that the special importance attached to costly imported woods, notably *zitan* and *huanghuali*, by Western writers such as Ecke served to heighten a bias in collecting towards particular wood types in later collections resulting in an emphasis on a refined set of materials over craftsmanship in first Western, and later Chinese, collecting practices. Evaluating the root of this collecting preference requires consideration of whether the emphasis on *huanghuali* accurately reflects consumption in Ming and early Qing China or is based on the inclination of later, principally Western collectors, based on the verbal testimony of Peking antique dealers in late Republican China. This can be evaluated through a consideration of the delta between Western historiography and documentary evidence originating in the Ming and Qing dynasties. There is clear evidence for a symbiotic relationship between the historiography of classical Chinese furniture and the development of Western collecting in the field. In the case of both Ecke and Kates, *Chinese Domestic Furniture* and *Chinese Household Furniture* were the product of collecting activity in China based on information and labels circulated by antique dealers and Chinese collectors, reinterpreted and solidified into fact by Western authors. Reference to Chinese texts and Ming documentary evidence and a comparison of furniture pieces in imported and vernacular woods facilitates consideration of whether these attachments were shared by the early original consumers and users of Chinese furniture which we now regard as being in the ‘classic’ style.

The two woods that largely dominate present collecting practices, *huanghuali* and *zitan*, whilst visually distinctive, were challenging for the early furniture historiographers to identify; much of the literature on materials is devoted to analysis of probable geographic origins and genus of the species. Ecke described the difficulties of identifying the exact genus of different woods species and devoted brevilouquent sections in the Introduction to *Chinese Domestic Furniture* to setting out the properties and variations of each of the four woods identified in his introduction. The section on *huali* includes a list of three distinct variations:

1. *Lao-hua-li* [*lao huali*] described as dull and used particularly in plain furniture “during the first part of the nineteenth century”.

¹⁵⁰ Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces*, 25. This topic is also addressed in Chapter Three in relation to Ming primary source materials referenced by Wang Shixiang.

2. *Huang-hua-li* [*huanghuali*], described by Ecke as “exquisite”.
3. *Hsin-hua-li*, which Ecke described as being “really of the *hungmu* group and latterly used for copying antique furniture”.

The Chinese characters which Ecke attributes to *huanghuali* appear to be a homophone of the original Ming Chinese name for this wood which has become ubiquitous in literature. The literal translation of these characters may be interpreted as ‘yellow flowering pear’ although the modern interpretation is typically “yellow rosewood”. Ecke attributed the inclusion of the character ‘yellow’ as follows: “The wood of old *huali* furniture is generally specified as ‘yellow’ (*huang*) to describe the tinge of colour common to all genuine pieces, whether light or oxidised. A golden shimmer appears in this tone, as though reflected from a foil, and suffuses the polished surface with a strange glow of beauty.”¹⁵¹ As Alan and Camille Fung submitted in their article on *huanghuali*, published in the *Journal of the Classical Chinese Furniture Society* (“JCCFS”) in 1991, the written form of *huali* as cited in earlier Ming texts sought to elucidate the foil-like, light reflective effect described by Ecke by reference to the metallic sheen of the fur of the civet cat, also expressed orally as ‘*huanghuali*’ referenced different characters with a distinct and separate meaning. In the Ming references cited by Alan and Camille Fung, the original form of the written Chinese characters *huali* 花狸 translate into English as “splotchy civet wood.”¹⁵² Historical research materials on *huanghuali* cited in the article, which included Ming and Qing Chinese botanical books and various *Materia Medica* from the Tang and Ming dynasties; Cao Zhao’s *Essential Criteria of Antiquities*; *The Kangxi Dictionary* and historic records of Guangzhou from the Han, Jin and Qing dynasties, among other references. The authors affirmed that *huanghuali* has been known by a range of different names throughout history. These include *hualimu* 花櫚木 which transliterated as “figured *liu* 櫚 wood” further substantiating that the transliteration *hua* 花 references the patterned surface appearance:

“When the latter type of timber happened to be vigorously figured with tabby markings and interlocked whorls resembling round coins of various sizes, it was accorded the

¹⁵¹ Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*. 24.

¹⁵² Alan and Camille Fung, “Huanghuali,” *Journal of the Classical Furniture Society* 1, no. 4 (Autumn 1991): 41-45. Among the references cited, the Han dynasty *Records of Guangzhou* records: “*Huali* wood comes from the south region, Guangdong. It is purple-red, similar to lakewood, and also has a fragrance. Its decorative pattern with demon face effects is adorable, the lower grades are the coarse wood grain and light in colour. People in Guangdong use it to make tea and wine cups.” Original Chinese text in Appendix 1. <https://theme.npm.edu.tw/opendata/DigitImageSets.aspx?sNo=04015189>. Accessed 20 November 2022.

name *hualimu* (splotchy civet wood). Two homophones for *hualimu* were used, one which may be translated as "flowery pear wood", and another which may be translated as "flowery aborigine wood."¹⁵³

Ecke's reference to *huanghuali* is the first description of this specific wood type in the published literature on Chinese furniture. Ferguson's *Survey* had previously referred only to *hualimu*, without the use of accompanying Chinese characters, which he transcribed as "rosewood" and defined simply as "A type of *Dalbergia* trees [sic] less valuable than *tzū-t'an* [*zitan*] and therefore more commonly found in furniture."¹⁵⁴ Given that the tree from which *huanghuali* derives is neither a fruit tree nor does it bear yellow flowers, as a literal translation of the Chinese characters would suggest, an exploration of Ecke's bibliography to understand the source of this homophonic interpretation becomes relevant. Norman Shaw's *Chinese Forest Trees and Timber Supply*, published in 1914, is not cited in Ecke's bibliography but is referenced in the text in relation to an unpublished manuscript dated 1941 by Dr. Henry Spencer Houghton (1880-1975) entitled *Cabinet Woods (The Principal Types Used in North China for Fine Joinery)*. Houghton was a director of the Peking Union Medical College ("PUMC"), who lived principally in Beijing between 1912 and 1945.¹⁵⁵ Hao Ping describes Dr. Houghton's home "in the Tungtan Third Alley" as a "Manchu princely residence, gorgeous and spacious, equipped with modern living facilities such as heating and shower." Houghton was also a collector of Chinese furniture and works of art and his unpublished manuscript, which it has not been possible to locate, appears to have been a work of personal interest. Although neither Ecke nor Kates included furniture belonging to Houghton in their books, items later sold at auction attest to his having collected furniture during his time in Beijing which he later transported to America.¹⁵⁶

A connection between Ecke and Houghton existed through Yang Yao, who executed many of the drawings for *Chinese Domestic Furniture*. During his architectural career, Yang had worked on the redesigned PUMC campus, financed by the Rockefeller Foundation, the construction of which Houghton had overseen in his capacity as President of the PUMC

¹⁵³ Fung, *Huanghuali*, 42.

¹⁵⁴ Ferguson, *Survey of Chinese Art*, 112.

¹⁵⁵ Houghton was well connected and counted a number of notable expatriate Beijing residents among his patients; the American Ambassador John Leighton Stuart, was imprisoned by the Japanese army in Houghton's home in 1941. See Hao Ping. 2016. *John Leighton Stuart's Political Career in China*. London: Routledge. 65.

¹⁵⁶ See, for example, a set of four *zitan* armchairs from Houghton's collection sold at auction in Hong Kong by Sotheby's in 2011. Sotheby's. Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art sale, lot 2108. Auction in Hong Kong. 4 October 2011. <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2011/fine-chinese-ceramics-and-works-of-art-hk0363/lot.2108.html>. Accessed 13.09.2020.

between 1921 and 1928.¹⁵⁷ The manuscript, which is quoted extensively by Ecke in his concise section on cabinet woods, is presented as a key source of information, although the ‘Acknowledgements’ section in *Chinese Domestic Furniture* reveals two further sources: Paul Steintorf, American Trade Commissioner, who provided “information on colonial woods”; and Dr. Hirotaro Hattori, Director of the Tokugawa Institute for Biological Research, who was acknowledged “for the determination of a sample of Ming cabinet wood.”¹⁵⁸

This section on materials in *Chinese Domestic Furniture* should be considered in the context of an earlier but less well known article, “Notes on some woods employed by Chinese Cabinet Makers” written by Ecke and published in 1940 in *Collectanea Commissionis Synodalis*.¹⁵⁹ Whilst the article ran to only two pages it represented a concise synopsis of the knowledge at the time of its publication relating to Chinese cabinet woods and demonstrated the paucity of substantive and factual information on the subject matter it sought to address. In the article, Ecke summarised some of the problems encountered with identifying species for some of the most significant wood types, as well as difficulties with inconsistent naming conventions: the opening passage on *huali* commences with the statement: “*Huali* is difficult to identify. The name is a trade name, known since the time of the Sung dynasty and probably earlier.”¹⁶⁰

The article cited the same four woods referenced in *Chinese Domestic Furniture* (*zitan*, *huali*, *hongmu* and *jichimu*) as “those principally used by the Su-chou cabinet makers” but denoted a broader range of woods than the narrower selection eventually included in *Chinese Domestic Furniture*. Here, Ecke stated that older pieces in *huali* were made from the genus *Lingoum Indicum* known to English and Dutch cabinet makers as Amboyna wood, an error which he did not repeat in the later text of *Chinese Domestic Furniture*. Rather, Ecke identified the indigenous Chinese variety of *huanghuali* as *Ormosia henryi* with early pieces classified as constructed in imported versions of the wood belonging to the subspecies *Pterocarpus indicus*.¹⁶¹ This latter subspecies is a Southeast Asian hardwood commonly

¹⁵⁷ Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 3. See also an obituary for Houghton from the New York Times, 24 March 1975. Accessed 26.11.2019. 34. <https://nyti.ms/4ea1Yb6>.

¹⁵⁸ Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*. Acknowledgements section, unpaginated preface to the principal text. Japanese biologist, Dr. Hirotaro Hattori (1875-1965) founded the imperial Tokugawa Institute for Biological Research. See Hideo Mohri, *Imperial Biologists: The Imperial Family of Japan and Their Contributions to Biological Research* (Singapore: Springer, 2019). <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-981-13-6756-4>.

¹⁵⁹ Gustav Ecke, “Notes on Some Woods Employed by Chinese Cabinet Makers”. *Collectanea Commissionis Synodalis*, Vol 13, no. 11-12 (November - December 1940): 1041-1042.

¹⁶⁰ Ecke, “Notes on Some Woods,” 1041.

¹⁶¹ Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 23.

known as Amboyna. The tendency to relate Chinese cabinet woods with those known for the use of furniture construction in the West and to confuse Amboyna and *huanghuali* is also apparent in Eleanor von Erdberg-Constens's 1945 review of *Chinese Domestic Furniture*: "While Tzu-t'an is deemed the most precious, Huang-li, with its golden lustre and often whimsical grain, is the hardwood most used for Ming and early Ch'ing furniture. In its Amboyna variety it was likewise used for English "Satinwood" and Dutch Colonial Furniture."¹⁶² This method of relative comparison with its tendency to Europeanise Asiatic references brings to mind the question of intended audience for the writing of Ecke and others. Paul Ricoeur has noted the significance of appropriation (which he relates to the German expression *Aneignen*, translated innocuously as "to make one's own") in relation to text as well as object: "Appropriation is the concept which is suitable for the actualisation of meaning as addressed to someone."¹⁶³

In the article Ecke provided two homophones for *huali*, 花梨 and 花桐. The second set of characters *hualü* 花桐, which can be translated literally as "flowering palm wood" but were more frequently translated as rosewood or *Ormosia henryi*, were not included in *Chinese Domestic Furniture*. In this earlier article, Ecke stated that the character *hua* 花 referred to the "curled and mottled grain, which in the best examples has eyes and knots". This explanation is closer to that provided by Alan and Camille Fung cited above and may therefore better align with translations of primary Ming texts such as those referenced therein. However, in the period between the publication of the article and book, Ecke seems inexplicably to have altered his view on the correct characters as *huali* 花梨 are the only characters that appear in reference to this particular type of wood in *Chinese Domestic Furniture*. Perhaps most importantly, Ecke established the concept of *huali* as a "collective" reference encompassing a number of different woods of different biological species; a concept which has been upheld by modern dealers in Chinese furniture to extend the applicability of the label '*huanghuali*' to a greater number of furniture items and indistinctive wood species than might otherwise have been possible based on a single biological definition.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Eleanor von Erdberg-Consten. Book Reviews. *Monumenta Serica*, 10(1), 437-441.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02549948.1945.11744872>. 439. Accessed 21.05.2022.

¹⁶³ Paul Ricoeur and John Thompson. 2016. *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 147.

¹⁶⁴ Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 21.

The Chinese title of *Chinese Domestic Furniture* is *Zhongguo huali jiaju tukao* 中國花梨家具圖 (Illustrated Research on Chinese *Huali* Furniture).¹⁶⁵ Although it appears that this name was translated by Ecke's associate Yang Zonghan (1901-1992) 楊宗翰 rather than by Ecke himself, it seems evident that the inclusion of '*huali*' was intended to distinguish the patriciate nature of the furniture pieces collected by expatriates in Beijing from the utilitarian, proletariat items in circulation and in use among ordinary households. Underscoring a preferential bias already observed towards pieces constructed in this particular wood, approximately eighty percent of the furniture represented in Ecke's book is classified as being constructed in *huanghuali*, although due to the difficulty of identification it is highly likely that at least some were constructed from variegated wood species which bore visual resemblance to the characteristics of *huanghuali*. The remaining twenty percent is split between the woods mentioned in the introductory section on cabinet woods (*zitan*, *hongmu* and *jichimu*); with three pieces listed as being constructed in *lau huali*; one in walnut; another in bamboo veneer and three in *nanmu* (a highly regarded soft wood indigenous to Southern China, often used in building due to its size and ability to withstand varying climactic conditions, classified by Ecke as "Persian pine" or *persea nanmu*).¹⁶⁶

The collectors whose pieces are represented in the book provide insight into Ecke's circle of Beijing-based sinologists, collectors and expatriates from a broad spectrum of nationalities. The greater proportion of pieces (approximately 20%) are from Ecke's own collection, with a notable proportion (11.5%) attributed to Mme Henri Vetch (the wife of the book's first publisher in Beijing) and 14% from the Drummond brothers, Robert and William, who later returned to New York where they established as dealers trading as Dynasty Furniture, supplying Arthur Sackler, among others. In contrast to Kates' later book, there is a demonstrable inclination towards items owned by German speaking collectors in Beijing such as Dr. Reinhard Hoeppli (1893-1971), Walter Bosshard (1892-1975) and art dealers J. Plaut (n.d.) and Mathias Komor (n.d.); and the diplomatic community; for example, Adam von Trott zu Solz (1909-1944) and the Italian Ambassador Francesco Maria Taliani de Marchio (1887-1967).¹⁶⁷ As will be examined further in the final chapter on items

¹⁶⁵ Gustav Ecke. 1992. 中國花梨家具圖考 ("Illustrated Study of Chinese *Huali* Furniture"). 臺北市: 南天 Taipei City: Nantian.

¹⁶⁶ Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 48.

¹⁶⁷ Dr Reinhard Hoeppli (1893-1973) was active in Beijing as both a medical professor and later member of the diplomatic corps. Hoeppli arrived in China to teach at the University of Amoy in Fujian in 1927-28 where Ecke was also employed as Professor of European Philosophy between 1923 and 1928. Having returned to Germany, in 1928 Hoeppli received a contract from the Rockefeller-funded PUMC in Beijing where he was resident until 1952. Under Japanese occupation, Hoeppli was asked to serve as Swiss Honorary Consul in Beijing and lived in the diplomatic legation. Ecke was later reunited with a portion of the collection in America. N. Morley. "Reinhard Hoeppli (1893-1973): The life and curious afterlife of a

from the collection of Dr. Otto Burchard (1892-1965), the German art dealer and expert in East Asian art and close friend and associate of Laurence Sickman, and others which were included in *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, were later acquired by the NAMA in Kansas City under Sickman's curatorship. Furniture belonging to the Drummonds which featured in the book, also entered American public collections through gift by Arthur Sackler to the Smithsonian Institution; with further pieces appearing in other American museum collections.

It is a critical legacy of Ecke's contribution to the historiography on the subject matter that *Chinese Domestic Furniture* created a group of furniture items which are associated with Ecke both as objectival entities and as precedential exemplars of superlative workmanship and materials. In a letter to Laurence Sickman at the NAMA, dated 9 March 1966, the Chinese furniture dealer Gerald Godfrey (n.d.) wrote the following in reference to the procurement of silk gauze curtains for display in the gallery for the tester bed in the Museum's collection: "I have also obtained the sample of silk gauze for the bed ... the only trouble is that the mill that weaves it insists on a minimum order of 1,000 yards! How many Huang Hua Li [sic] Ecke beds do you have in the Museum?"¹⁶⁸ This later identification of the item as an 'Ecke bed' was predicated on the fact of its inclusion in *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, notwithstanding the fact that the bed had never belonged to Ecke, having famously been owned (as Gerald Godfrey would have been aware) by the collector Sydney M. Cooper and subsequently purchased by James Speer (1898-1969) from whom the NAMA had acquired it. (Figure 1.13)

This enduring affiliation with Ecke in his capacity as author and authenticator underscores the significance of *Chinese Domestic Furniture* in creating a group (or "collection") of apotheosised furniture pieces that have become inextricably associated with him by virtue of inclusion in the book which has become a critical touchstone for the appraisal and evaluation of Chinese furniture objects. This sustained relevance of the book as a source of provenance research and reference for the evaluation and appraisal of furniture items acquires an augmented significance in light of the absence of original records relating to their construction and acquisition in the Ming and Qing dynasties. In view of the exceptional paucity of original documentation surrounding the manufacture of items of furniture, *Chinese Domestic Furniture* has acquired subsequent relevance in registering the

distinguished parasitologist". *Journal of Medical Biography*. 2021;29(3):162-169.
doi:10.1177/0967772019877608

¹⁶⁸ Letter dated 9 March 1966 from Gerald Godfrey to Laurence Sickman. Nelson-Atkins Museum Archives, RG02 Dept of Oriental Art: Series I.L.S-A Correspondence. Horstmann, Charlotte 1958-72 (Box 4, File 4)

existence of furniture objects which prior to the book's publication were undocumented and without narrative or contextualising evidence other than excavated items and furniture depicted in paintings. Although the book contains only scant biographical detail of the furniture items illustrated in the plates, the record of their ownership and collection provided a determinative foundational historical record for the progressive construction of later objectival and archival histories.

A prescient example of this exists in a pair of cabinets of which one is included in *Chinese Domestic Furniture* as item no. 90 (Figure 1.14). The cabinets are catalogued as the "Pty of H. E. the Italian Ambassador and the Marchesa Taliani de Marchio" and were presented at auction in 2017 alongside a set of *huanghali* Ming dynasty folding chairs. The set of chairs was documented by Ecke both in *Chinese Domestic Furniture* and the article published earlier in the same year "Wandlungen des Faltstuhls."¹⁶⁹ (Figure 1.15) The catalogue essay for the sale of these chairs in 2017 notes that the items that were offered from the Marchese Taliani collection were accompanied by dealer documentation and receipts dated between 1938-1946 which also form part of the derivative historical record of these objects. It should be noted that the folding chairs themselves, though the subject of the article "Wandlungen des Faltstuhls" did not feature in *Chinese Domestic Furniture* because the folding chair style was considered to be for imperial, rather than domestic use. Making further reference to the distinction between what would come to be known as "classic" furniture, Ecke wrote: "It is... remarkable that recently a set of four Chinese folding chairs found their way into the Taliani collection. Its parts are made in padauk wood, formed with an upright post-rest closely related to King Philip's folding chair."¹⁷⁰

This statement comparing the chairs in the Taliani collection with a similar Spanish chair in the Escorial palace in Madrid was accompanied by a statement that this type of chair was typically regarded as European, having fallen out of favour with the Chinese to become the preferred seating of compradors. It is a reasonable hypothesis that the exuberant market reception in 2017 to these pieces was heightened by the substantiated provenance and historic significance conveyed through Ecke's writing and the credence imparted by 'ex-cathedra' academic attention.¹⁷¹ In this sense, the catalogue of record that has been formed by *Chinese Domestic Furniture* imbues these selected objects with a secondary history

¹⁶⁹ Gustav Ecke. 1944. "Wandlungen des Faltstuhls," 34-52.

¹⁷⁰ Ecke, "Wadlungen des Faltstuhls," 34-35.

¹⁷¹ Bonhams. Lot 80. "An Important and Exceptionally Rare Set of Four *Huanghuali* Folding Chairs, *Jiaoyi*, 16th/17th Century," in *Fine Chinese Art*. (London: Bonhams, 9 November 2017). <https://www.bonhams.com/auction/24101/lot/80/an-important-and-exceptionally-rare-set-of-four-huanghuali-folding-chairs-jiaoyi-16th17th-century-4/>. Accessed 23.12.2018.

commencing several hundred years subsequent to their (largely) undocumented and anonymous manufacture in the Ming Dynasty.

In spite of challenges deriving from the scarce availability of research materials or the relative brevity of the introductory essay, *Chinese Domestic Furniture* is distinguished by the combination of a rigorous academic approach with first-hand subjective commentary which bears witness to Ecke's own sense of aesthetic propriety and taste. Paul Demiéville's obituary of Ecke notes that his approach to Chinese art was "somewhat romantic, with a note of personal involvement tending to make the old works alive in light of our modern sensibility." This personalisation of subject matter in which subjective preferential perspective combined with academic analysis and historic detail appears to have been a feature of Ecke's writing, extending to subjects beyond furniture such as Chinese paintings.¹⁷²

Ecke's modernist sensibilities and his upbringing in Germany where the Modernist movement took root have been noted by writers such as Handler. Among those statements in the text for *Chinese Domestic Furniture* indicating Ecke's aversion to decorated furniture and his inclination towards a Modernist aesthetic are references to the "functional conception of form, inseparable from the meaning of the structure", reminiscent of the maxim "form follows function" attributed to the Modernist architect Louis Sullivan.¹⁷³ Handler has noted the relevance of Ecke's upbringing in an academic family in the German city of Bonn after the first war.¹⁷⁴ The Weimar Republic in Germany is widely regarded as the birthplace of architectural modernism marked by the establishment of the Bauhaus school for architecture and craft in 1919 in Weimar Republic. Despite the socio-economic and cultural differences between Weimar and the more conservative city of Bonn where Ecke was raised, it is conceivable that he would have been exposed to innovatory government-led developments in the German capital leading to the formation of the *Staatliches Bauhaus*. Adjectives such as "timeless" and "restrained" feature as high praise for individual pieces. A Ming *huanghuali* cupboard is described as "perfect in structural design and restrained composition."¹⁷⁵ An entirely unadorned waisted couch with hooved feet is referred to as having "attained the ultimate harmony of composition."¹⁷⁶ (Figure 2) By contrast, of

¹⁷² Demiéville, "Gustav Ecke, 1896-1971," 470.

¹⁷³ Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 30; Louis H. Sullivan. 1896. *The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott. Accessed 31 March 2021.
<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100239715403-9>.

¹⁷⁴ Handler. *Austere Luminosity*, 29. See, for example, Joachim Remak. "The Bauhaus' Long Shadow: Some Thoughts about Weimar and Us." *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (1970): 201-11.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40488835>.

¹⁷⁵ Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 18 and Plate 111.

¹⁷⁶ Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 17.

furniture which is overtly carved or ornate, Ecke commented: "...sumptuous carvings encroach on the natural beauty of the wood and start interfering with the greatness of linear composition."¹⁷⁷

Although Ecke himself neither used nor originated the designation 'classic' to describe the spartan aesthetic and historically consistent forms of Ming and early Qing furniture, it is possible that Sickman's later use of the term was inspired by the eloquent closing paragraph of *Chinese Domestic Furniture*:

The setting of [Chinese] daily life retains an appearance of archaic austerity... of restraint in design and ornament... power of line and cubic proportion which is second nature to the classic Chinese builder.¹⁷⁸

Whilst acknowledging the difficulties of dating Chinese furniture, Ecke makes clear his preferential bias towards the simplicity of earlier Ming furniture, describing the mid to late Qing period as bringing forth "the decay of artistic taste."¹⁷⁹ To Ecke, the overt decoration which characterises later Qing furniture detracted from the inherent natural qualities of the materials employed in its creation. Eleanor von Erdberg-Consten expressed this most clearly in her 1945 book review: "By inserting the word "domestic" into the title, the author has made it clear that neither palace show pieces nor elaborate horrors for export may find their way into this book."¹⁸⁰

6. 1948: George Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*

The aesthetic delineated by Ecke was also common to many of the pieces included in George Kates' similarly named book, *Chinese Household Furniture*, published four years later in 1948 in New York and London. Given that a number of the same collections - namely those belonging to the Drummond Brothers, Jean-Pierre Dubosc and Ecke - were represented in both books the presence of a shared aesthetic is unsurprising. Approximately one quarter of the furniture items featured by Kates in *Chinese Household Furniture* derived from Ecke's

¹⁷⁷ Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 31.

¹⁷⁸ Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 33.

¹⁷⁹ Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*. 5.

¹⁸⁰ Erdberg-Consten, Book review "Chinese Domestic Furniture," 437.

personal collection and featured in *Chinese Domestic Furniture*.¹⁸¹ Beyond this commonality, Kates' selection of items represented a wider variety of woods and included items that evidently date from the later Qing period and do not confirm rigidly to the austere 'classical' ideal. It is relevant to both the conception and origin of *Chinese Household Furniture* to note that almost one quarter of the 125 furniture items featured are cited as belonging to Caroline Bieber. Only six pieces belonged to Kates, whereas twenty-eight items were from the Bieber collection. This collectorship in part explains the less elitist perspective and less highly refined aesthetic that characterises Kates' book in comparison with *Chinese Domestic Furniture*.

The project was initiated by Bieber who was to become a significant adjuvant force in Kates' engagement with Chinese furniture, supporting him after his return to America in challenging financial circumstances. Brady and Brown describe how the expatriate community of 'aesthetes' living in Beijing organised themselves socially into distinct 'salons': Kates was a key member of Bieber's salon, tagged 'the Bieber Boys' which also included Laurence Sickman and Harold Acton.¹⁸² John Roote's anecdotal but well-researched biographical account of Kates' life suggests that Bieber was instrumental in encouraging Kates' interest in Chinese furniture during their time in Beijing, citing the following testimony from Cecil B. Lyons (1903-1993) an American diplomat stationed in China and former Harvard classmate of Kates: "A friend of his sisters, an English maiden lady Miss Bieber... was also interested in this early, simple, almost modernistic style of Chinese furniture, not elaborate, carved blackwood furniture which one sees more often. I believe she helped to form George's taste for this."¹⁸³

Kates' memoir contains several descriptive references of the characteristic properties of Chinese Ming style furniture, such as "simple furniture of excellent design"; "unpretentious good furniture"; and "excellent simple furniture of hardwood so dense that it was said to sink in water; so beautiful in grain and surface that it was often like the back of an old violin." In *The Years That Were Fat*, Kates asserted that it was surprising that this type of furniture had not yet reached American museum collections which tended to feature late and highly carved "teak" pieces: these he described as "curios rather than household

¹⁸¹ As noted, there is some duplication between the pieces featured in Kates and Ecke's books; nine of Gustav Ecke's 25 pieces featured in *Chinese Household Furniture* also appear in *Chinese Domestic Furniture*.

¹⁸² Anne-Marie Brady and Douglas Brown, eds. 2012. *Foreigners and Foreign Institutions in Republican China*. Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group. Accessed 22.07.24. ProQuest Ebook Central. 154.

¹⁸³ Roote, John A., and Fergus M. Bordewich. *A Love Affair with Old Beijing: The Remarkable Story of George Kates*, Forbidden City Books, 2015. E-book, location 1030. <https://read.amazon.com/?asin=B0173T2GRU>. Accessed 12.03.2018.

furniture.”¹⁸⁴ This sentiment was echoed in *Chinese Household Furniture* attributed to “the general level of taste in our stupid nineteenth century” and to the “vested interests of Philistine merchants.”¹⁸⁵ Kates also asserted that he had unknowingly and intuitively through his own good taste recreated the interior favoured by the Chinese literati through selecting furniture that had been overlooked, “unnoticed by the art historian”. There are also references to “big and little Furniture Streets” as a place for the procurement of furnishings and to “Liu-li-chang” where the best antiques were procured.¹⁸⁶ However, the memoir of Kates’ seven-year tenure in China may provide some insight into the relatively ephemeral and possibly functional nature of his interest in Chinese furniture. Given that Kates is remembered and considered as one of the original Western scholars of Chinese hardwood Ming and Qing furniture, there are relatively few references in *The Years That Were Fat* to the process by which Kates acquired his furniture collection and minimal commentary on Chinese furniture in general.

Chinese Household Furniture initially evolved as a collaboration between Bieber and Kates’ younger sister Beatrice. Beatrice Kates (n.d.) was an interior designer, then living in New York, who visited Beijing in 1937 and again in 1938 to undertake research related to her field.¹⁸⁷ The German photographer Hedda Hammer Morrison appears to have been next to join the project. Having moved to China to manage Hartung’s photography studio, she commenced work for Bieber as her assistant and photographer when her studio contract ended in 1938.¹⁸⁸ Archival records at the NAMA in Kansas City, Missouri, recording Laurence Sickman’s expenditures during his years in China as a buying agent for the Museum record payments to Hartung’s for photographs of furniture and other items acquired on behalf of the Nelson Gallery.¹⁸⁹ Bieber was interested in capturing for posterity images of traditional craftsmen of the capital at work and Morrison assisted her in this enterprise.¹⁹⁰ Bieber also collected Chinese textiles and decorative objects, notably embroideries, silks and belt toggles, many of which were sold to American museums or later gifted to the Field Museum in Chicago. There are numerous records in the NAMA Archives which refer to items purchased from Bieber, typically examples of applied decorative arts rather than ‘higher’ forms of art which were procured from more eminent dealers such as C.T. Loo,

¹⁸⁴ Kates, *The Years That Were Fat*. 17-25, 84.

¹⁸⁵ Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*. 1-43.

¹⁸⁶ Kates, *The Years That Were Fat*, 41-42. ,

¹⁸⁷ Roote. *A Love Affair with Old Beijing*. E-book locations 1308 and 1962.

¹⁸⁸ Hedda Morrison. 1985. *A Photographer in Old Peking*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press. 15.

¹⁸⁹ The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Archives. Laurence Sickman Papers, MS001 III Nelson Gallery. Account book 1932-35. Box 10f; File 04.

¹⁹⁰ Brady and Brown. *Foreigners and Foreign Institutions in Republican China*, 105.

Yamanaka and R. H. Ellsworth. There is clear evidence that Bieber was established in the commercial East Asian art world and functioned both as a dealer or dealer's agent as well as in a collecting capacity, with a specialism in applied and textile arts. For example, there are entries in Laurence Sickman's accounting book for the period 1932-1935 which make reference to moneys remitted to Bieber, principally for the purchase of textiles for the collection at the NAMA in Kansas City, such as this entry dated 21 August 1932: "Bill of Biba: 900.00 [Biba commission on purchase of \$2400.00] 240."¹⁹¹

As with Ecke's *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, George Kates' book provides a useful testimonial to collecting practices among expatriates in Beijing before the Japanese invasion of 1937. Kates described in the preface to his book the circumstances under which the book, initially conceived as a photography project, came into being.

...these two ladies set about their project. They found a third helper, invaluable for the project, in a talented photographer, Hedda Hammer, and began their search for the best [furniture] in houses in many parts of the walled city. The camera was ready to click once servants had hauled the pieces selected to open courtyards, and - if possible - had stretched cloth backings behind to isolate them from irrelevant surroundings... Conversation kept bringing to light new possibilities, chits were sent back and forth by messengers, appointments made, the light observed, and finally the pictures were made.¹⁹²

Aside from having a few pieces of his own furniture collection included in the photographic records and measurements made by his sister Beatrice, Bieber and Morrison, Kates does not appear to have been directly involved in these early stages of the project. The text for the book was written after his return to America in 1947 whilst he was Curator of Oriental Art at the Brooklyn Museum, a post he held for only two years. It is perhaps typical of the period that a project initiated and undertaken by three women should have been defined by reference to the profession of its male author. Bieber was the self-described 'assembler' of the project and towards Kates she took the role of both patron and

¹⁹¹ MS001 Laurence Sickman Papers III Nelson Gallery. Account book 1932-35. Box 10f; File 04. Similarly, records and addresses of European dealers provided to Laurence Sickman as an introduction to key art market participants such as C.T Loo, Charles Vignier and Paul Mallon on his first European trip to London and Paris in 1935 demonstrate Bieber's establishment in the field. Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Records, Department of Asian Art Records. International Exhibition of Chinese Art in London, 1935-1936 File — Box: RG02.08, Folder: 05-07.

¹⁹² Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*. ix.

benefactor.¹⁹³ The project she devised as a photographic record of the furniture which she and her circle of friends and compatriots had collected in Beijing has become inextricably associated with his name rather than hers. It is apparent that Kates wrote the text without having participated actively in the initial task of identifying and documenting the pieces themselves. Kates wrote: “The text to these photographs made in Peking, where I also happened to be during the years before and after they were made, I myself have added.”¹⁹⁴ The identification of wood attributed to each piece was similarly determined by the female originators of the project, presumably either provided by the owner (likely to have been as described by the dealer at point of acquisition) or identified in a non-scientific manner. Kates described the process by which details of the objects featured were recorded in the following statement: “the three women who created [the book]... made the measurements and determined in so far as they were able the names of the woods used by the native cabinet maker, as well as similar details by which each piece can be permanently identified”.¹⁹⁵ There is no attempt at dating the pieces illustrated in the book and the difficulties of dating are explained with the conclusion: “to draw an arbitrary line between late Ming and early Ch’ing production... in the present state of our knowledge would be imprudent and premature.”¹⁹⁶

Publication in both Europe and America should have afforded *Chinese Household Furniture* greater circulation and acknowledgement than Ecke’s *Chinese Domestic Furniture*. Ecke’s book was published in a short print run of 200 volumes by Henri Vetch in Beijing in the chaotic environment of the second Sino-Japanese war and was not republished until 1962; Kates’ work by contrast was published and promoted on a relatively greater scale across two continents. For the majority of its audience, *Chinese Household Furniture* would have represented their first exposure to Chinese hardwood furniture. In addition to overlap in the items of furniture and collections featured in the plates, there is similarity in the structure and arrangement. Both books commence with a relatively concise written introduction accompanying a significant number of plates. Furniture was arranged by function and by type.¹⁹⁷

Aimed at a public entirely uninformed on the subtle luxury of hardwood furniture, *Chinese Household Furniture* covers broad ground with relatively little depth of analysis.

¹⁹³ A signed copy of the book inscribed by Caroline Bieber reads: “In memory of Peking, from the assembler of this book 1938-48”

¹⁹⁴ Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*, xi.

¹⁹⁵ Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*, xii.

¹⁹⁶ Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*, 18.

¹⁹⁷ *Chinese Domestic Furniture* featured 122 furniture examples in black and white plates: *Chinese Household Furniture* 125 examples.

Kates stated that due to the vacuum of knowledge on Chinese hardwood furniture in the West his intention was to provide accessibility to his subject matter rather than to create an academic work which would be relevant to and understood by only a few.¹⁹⁸ Kates' book is typically regarded as an introduction to the topic for a lay audience and its contents are more varied and inclusive than Ecke's. The range of furniture illustrated is less constrained by taste, although the concept of "good taste" is an important and recurring feature of Kates' writing.¹⁹⁹ As has been mentioned already, approximately a quarter of the furniture featured in the book belonged to Bieber. The disparity between Bieber and Ecke's approach to collecting and scholarship explain why the furniture examples featured in Kates' book is arguably less refined than those selected for illustration by Ecke.²⁰⁰ Of the twenty-nine pieces in *Chinese Household Furniture* attributed to Bieber only three are classified as being constructed in *huanghuali*. The remaining items from Bieber's collection are listed by Kates as being made from indigenous woods such as *nanmu* (as previously noted, an indigenous variety of cedar used in the architectural construction); *jichimu*; *hongmu*; *changmu* (camphor wood); *huamu* (burl wood); *yumu* (elm wood); *li-tzu-mu* (probably a fruit wood; possibly lychee or pear) and *nan yumu* (a Northern Chinese term for *yu*, or elm, wood). Twenty-five pieces are attributed to Gustav Ecke's collection, of which all but three pieces are in *huanghuali*. Of the twelve pieces belonging to William and Robert Drummond's collection, ten are listed as being constructed in *huanghuali*, with one in each of *hungmu* and *jichimu*.

Kates classified the woods used in making furniture into two principal types: a premium classification (described as "the finest") which consisted of *huali*, *zitan*, *hongmu*, *huamu* and *jichimu*; and "secondary woods", which he determined to be of a significantly lower rank. This second category consisted of "*nan-mu*", "*lao yü-mu*", "*nan yü-mu*", "*chang-mu*", "*pai-mu*", "*li-mu*, also *li-tzu-mu*" and others.²⁰¹ Kates identified the Philippines and the East Indies as the location from which much of this wood was sourced and suggested that China had been undergoing a process of deforestation for many centuries with the result that since the thirteenth century the best cabinet woods had been imported.²⁰² This statement effectively classified most of the indigenous Chinese woods as being inferior in the

¹⁹⁸ Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*, xi.

¹⁹⁹ Consistent with Ecke, Kates writes scathingly about ornamental and decorated furniture styles, referring to "the bad taste of the Victorian age, with its interest in Oriental "carved teak" and extolling the virtues of the more "sober and dignified" styles which he described as "excellent simple furniture".

²⁰⁰ Ecke's interest in *huanghuali* has been cited already with reference to the Chinese title for *Chinese Domestic Furniture*. An important distinction between Kates and Ecke is the scholarship that Ecke published on furniture in advance of and beyond *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, which were published in *Monumenta Serica*, including his article on Chinese cabinet woods published in 1940.

²⁰¹ Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*, 23.

²⁰² Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*, 19.

production of fine furniture whilst imported woods were more highly regarded. The idea that the finest woods – and by inference, therefore, the most desirable pieces of furniture were made from imported woods, has become a consistent and recurrent theme throughout the literature on Chinese hardwood furniture; though most writers and connoisseurs concede that the most attractively coloured and figured *huanghuali* came from Hainan Island in Southern China. See, for example, the following description from Hu Desheng 胡德生:

Huanghuali belongs to the *huangtan* (yellow rosewood) species... According to modern botanical classification, *Hainan Jiangxiang huangtan* belongs to *huangtan* (yellow rosewood) group, which belongs to the *xiangzhimu* (fragrant branch wood family). It is the best of the *huangtan* group.... *Hainan jiangxiang huangtan* trees are primarily found in rugged mountainous regions of central and western Hainan Island. The wood is hard, finely textured and are beautifully grained.²⁰³

Like Ecke, Kates theorised that the best furniture in the book is “in general made of a wood called *hua-li*, which is very prized by Chinese connoisseurs.” He also delineated the same three subcategories of *huali* wood that Ecke had earlier identified: *lao huali*, *xin huali* and “the highly prized *huang*, or yellow, *hua-li* which is a lighter shade of the best old wood.”²⁰⁴ This information, Kates claimed, was derived from “the local Peking furniture dealers” which provides further confirmation of the originators and disseminators of knowledge among expatriate collectors. *Hongmu* was described as a wood related to *huanghuali*, but “slightly inferior... much used for rather bourgeois, if expensive, pieces in the nineteenth century and in our own time.”²⁰⁵ There is some basis for this statement as *hongmu* was indeed popular in Guangdong in the 19th century for making ornate, carved and highly decorated furniture for export. In actuality as a pair of chairs owned by Harold Acton and featured in both *Chinese Domestic Furniture* and *Chinese Household Furniture* illustrate, *hongmu* was also used for the manufacture of classical furniture. (Figure 1.16). However, it is clear that Kates’ knowledge of Chinese furniture woods, whether indigenous or imported, was at best rather sketchy. He explained the lack of botanical certitude in his writing as stemming from a general absence of available information relevant to the subject, which he in turn attributed to the fact that wood had historically been imported to China in

²⁰³ Hu Desheng. 2007. *The Palace Museum Collection: A Treasury of Ming and Qing Dynasty Palace Furniture*, Volumes I & II. Beijing and Chicago: Forbidden City Publishing House Beijing; Art Media Resources Ltd, Chicago, Illinois. 578.

²⁰⁴ Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*, 20.

²⁰⁵ Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*, 20.

the form of cut logs, making the exact species of tree from which the wood was obtained impossible to distinguish. Confusingly, he also suggests that varieties of *huanghuali* were “native.... to Southern China.... Malaysia, India, Burma, Sumatra [Western Indonesia], the Malay Archipelago and the Philippine Islands.” Following earlier writers, Kates was content to label *huanghuali* as “rosewood” because he considered the grain and colour to be comparable to European rosewoods.²⁰⁶ Most modern research and connoisseurs point to only two principal types of *huanghuali*: *Dalbergia odorifera* T. Chen from Hainan Island and *Dalbergia tonkinensis* Prain from Vietnam.²⁰⁷ With regard to items in *zitan* and *huanghuali*, Kates was correct in his statement that most pieces in this wood were considered collectable items and were prized by Chinese as well as Western collectors.”²⁰⁸

Of the sources referenced by both Ecke and Kates relevant to Chinese woods, the lack of Chinese material is conspicuous by its relative absence; almost all of the principal sources cited in the bibliographies of both books were authored by Western writers and sources. Both Kates and Ecke cited Emil Bretschneider (1833-1901) and Norman Shaw (n.d.) as the principal authorities on Chinese woods.²⁰⁹ In his bibliography Kates referred to a number of sources of information on Chinese dendrology written by “scientifically trained Chinese” as further reading material for those interested in the topic although he does not quote from them.²¹⁰ There is no indication that Kates had consulted these sources as the information conveyed in *Chinese Household Furniture* relevant to cabinet woods was both nebulous and culturally oriented rather than scientific. The only source directly acknowledged in his writing is the oral evidence provided by Peking furniture dealers.

Kates articulated what he perceived to be fundamental differences between Western and Chinese practices in record keeping as the preservation of cultural evidence essential to the creation and comprehension of a history of aesthetic formation and philosophy. He noted that the Chinese approach to documenting the cultural significance of the applied arts was

²⁰⁶ Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*. 20.

²⁰⁷ Min Yu Min, Liu Kai, Liang Zhou Liang, Lei Zhao Lei & Shengquan Liu. (2016). “Testing three proposed DNA barcodes for the wood identification of *Dalbergia odorifera* T. Chen and *Dalbergia tonkinensis* Prain”. *Holzforschung*. 70. 10.1515/hf-2014-0234. Accessed 12.05.2019.

²⁰⁸ Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*. 8.

²⁰⁹ Emil Bretschneider was a Russian medic who worked in Beijing between 1866 and 1883 as doctor to the Russian diplomatic legation whose interests extended to botany and sinology; Norman Shaw was employed by the Chinese Maritime Customs Service and authored *Chinese Forest Trees and Timber Supply*, published in 1914 by T. Fisher Unwin, London.

²¹⁰ Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*, 61. The principle Chinese reference cited in Kates’ bibliography is Chun Woon Young, *Chinese Economic Trees*, published in Shanghai in 1921. Kates made further reference to an article by Huang Yi-jen entitled *Chinese Precious Woods*, published in 1926 in the *North-China Herald* and the *Chinese Economic Bulletin* and two articles from a series entitled *Timber Studies of Chinese Trees: Identification of Some Important Hardwoods in Northern China by their Gross Structures* by Tang Yueh from the *Fan Memorial Institute of Biology*, published in 1932, and an article from the same publication by Chow Hang-fan on *The Familiar Trees of Hopei*, published in 1934.

not, as in the West, chronological, comprehensive and classificatory, but rather involved documenting the implied social and semiotic conventions and connotations conveyed by specific categories of art objects (furniture in the present case) in terms of its arrangement, use and positioning. Given Kates' extensive linguistic abilities and knowledge of Chinese literature and culture, acquired during his time in Beijing, combined with his academic art historical background and exceptional access to the archives and libraries of the Imperial Palace, it seems incongruent that Kates did not reference archival sources or historic Chinese texts either as evidence for documentation of Chinese furniture or as references for further enquiry, particularly in view of the fact that he had been provided with a special pass to the imperial archives and libraries in the Imperial City, arranged by John Ferguson.²¹¹ Ecke also omitted any reference to such primary source materials, though he must have been aware of them.

Regarding the scarcity of coeval reference material for Ming and Qing Chinese furniture, Kates commented that "curiously slight existing literary documentation [exists to] ... achieve a clearer picture of the superior Chinese household in days of refinement and ease.", remarking that "The Chinese... have not given much notice, in literature, to their own production [of furniture]." Chinese sources mentioned by Kates exceed those referred to by Ecke. He cited *Dream of the Red Chamber*; the Classic of *Lu Ban*; and more vaguely "typical Chinese encyclopaedias and local gazetteers."²¹² The omission of Chinese language research may also stand as evidence of Kates' later association with the study of furniture which as described above probably began after his departure from China and return to America. With present knowledge we may perhaps accuse Kates of giving insufficient notice to Chinese literature connected to furniture, notwithstanding its relative exiguity. This disregard of Chinese sources is accompanied an undercurrent of cultural hegemony which pervaded Kates' writing. According to Roote's biographical study of Kates: "An attitude of superiority was, unfortunately, pervasive through much of the history of the interaction between the West and China, especially during the 'century of humiliation'... Kates was not exempt from this attitude, he was part of it."²¹³

Whilst referring to the Chinese as a "civilised people", Kates articulated a widely held neocolonialistic belief that the interest and approbation of Western collectors had resulted in the redemption and salvaging of Chinese hardwood furniture amidst a turbulent

²¹¹ Kates, *The Years That Were Fat*, 114.

²¹² Kates, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 6, 9.

²¹³ Roote, *A Love Affair with Old Beijing*, e-book location 1796.

and calamitous period in China's history.²¹⁴ Kates inferred that Western collectors had quite literally saved from the furnace of political upheaval, neglect and indifference those superior items of Chinese furniture which had not already been broken up and repurposed to support human sustenance in an impoverished China. This attitude is evident in statements such as: "Credit for a part of this work of reconstruction is therefore due to the Westerner, whose curiosity and persistence have... brought tangible results."²¹⁵ This tacit suggestion, reiterated in the statement in *Chinese Household Furniture* that the pieces photographed by Morrison, Beatrice Kates and Bieber were "the best of an old tradition, safe in temporary havens within the houses of members of the foreign colony", echoed a widely held contemporary belief or proposition that the Chinese did not value their own cultural output or have the desire or perhaps lacked the technical knowledge and ability to conserve it.²¹⁶

Kates' analysis and discourse on woods is surprisingly flimsy, based on hearsay and information from local dealers rather than primary research. Whilst the antique dealers of Liulichang 琉璃厂 antique street in Beijing were an important source of implicit and colloquial knowledge, valuable Ming and Qing sources were completely ignored. Chinese hardwood furniture had been for Kates a pleasurable pursuit during his time in Beijing rather than a topic for serious research. It is clear that Kates was disadvantaged in his writing by not having personally inspected the pieces he later described in the book which were photographed by Hedda Hammer Morrison and identified by his sister Beatrice and Caroline Bieber. One particularly hard to identify piece of furniture was described in an abstract and vague manner:

There is li-mu, also li-tzu-mu, whether two terms for one wood or quite possibly two different woods I have not been able to determine without identification of the pieces illustrated, now widely scattered.²¹⁷

²¹⁴ Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*, 1, "To comprehend the life of a civilised people one must know something of its furniture and setting for daily living."

²¹⁵ Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*, 11.

²¹⁶ Kates also submitted that these furniture items in the book had been "saved from the wreck of the old regime [and]... put into good condition again, such as only in general the "foreigner" could achieve." Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*, x, xi, 10. In *The Years That Were Fat*, Kates noted of the Imperial Archives that: "It was of course only another converted palace hall, yet it had better furniture than most - the archivists had a nice sense of these things - and its hardwood chairs were placed with undeviating symmetry about the walls or at heavy central tables." Such comments are at odds with the inference that fine hardwood furniture was not generally cherished by the Chinese.

²¹⁷ Kates, *The Years That Were Fat*. 23.

This confusion, or lack of regard for the identification of specific species may not have been incongruent with the approach to trading timber in China. At the turn of the 19th Century, Captain Patrick Ahern (1859-1945), responsible for the Philippines Forestry Bureau from 1900 to 1901, noted that less expensive woods were sometimes traded under the label of a more expensive or desirable type thus denigrating the better woods and lessening the importance attached to labels. Ahern noted that and that the methods used for determining wood types was rudimentary: “Notwithstanding this the Chinese never buy wood by invoice and attach little importance to names. Their methods of buying are very crude, the principal factors of importance to them are, that the wood does not float, and that it is of a dark colour... their method of buying is by inspection, cutting the wood with an axe and examining it...”²¹⁸

The scholarly output of Kates’ research efforts in Beijing culminated in two articles published after his return to America: “Prince Kung’s Palace and its Adjoining Garden in Peking”, published in *Monumenta Serica* in 1940; and “A New Date for the Origins of the Forbidden City,” published in 1943 in the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*.²¹⁹ Both papers advanced existing knowledge and were well-evidenced and thoroughly researched with supporting references to primary source material including the records in the imperial archives to which Kates was afforded such unique access during his time in Beijing. As with Ecke’s academic interests, it was towards Chinese architectural heritage, rather than furniture, that Kates directed art historical academic research work during his time in Beijing. In contrast with *The Years That Were Fat* and *Chinese Household Furniture*, his writings on architecture present as reasoned and accomplished academic discourses, rather than as pleasurable and nostalgic diversions. What Kates’ writing lacked in academic approach, however, was compensated for by its contextualisation and observation of furniture in use and in daily life. According to Handler, “More than anyone else, [Kates] placed the furniture in its context and saw it as part of a way of life.”²²⁰ Thus Kates accentuated for the first time a number of topics related to the use and presentation of furniture, including noting (though not illustrating) the Ming use of textiles in conjunction with hardwood furniture.

²¹⁸ George Patrick Ahern and the Philippines Forestry Bureau. Manila, 1901. *Compilation of Notes on the Most Important Timber Tree Species of the Philippine Islands*. 97.

²¹⁹ George Kates. 1943. “A New Date for the Origins of the Forbidden City.” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 180-202. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2718014>; H.-S Chen, and G.N. Kates. 1940. “Prince Kung’s Palace and Its Adjoining Garden in Peking.” *Monumenta Serica*, 5(1-2), 1-80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02549948.1940.11745121>

²²⁰ Sarah Handler, *Austere Luminosity of Classical Chinese Furniture*, 36.

Despite the shortfall of academic substance in *Chinese Household Furniture*, Kates' financial situation both during his time in Beijing and after returning to America was such that he could not afford to be immune to the commercial possibilities of Chinese hardwood furniture. Beatrice and Kates had intended to go into business together, shipping hardwood furniture to New York to be sold there.²²¹ Whilst their plans were frustrated by the second Sino-Japanese war which compelled expatriate residents in Beijing to leave China, Kates and Beatrice managed to ship their own collections to America (according to Roote, with the intention of selling them as Kates did in 1955 after first exhibiting his furniture at the Brooklyn Museum in 1946). In *The Years That Were Fat*, Kates wrote: "My sober range of dignified furniture I found was one almost unknown to the West."²²² It is clear from a reading of the correspondence between Kates and his sister Beatrice and from his own account in *The Years That Were Fat* that his financial situation was in a state of constant disarray and that his ability to purchase a quantity of good quality furniture, as other expatriate residents of Beijing had done during this era, would have been constrained by his pecuniary circumstances.

²²¹ Kates letter to Mrs. Francis, mother of his Harvard classmate Henry Sayles Francis, July 15, 1937. Quoted in Roote, *A Love Affair with Old Beijing*, e-book location 1973.

²²² Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*, 24-25.

CHAPTER 2: THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF CHINESE CLASSICAL FURNITURE BEYOND ECKE AND KATES

Collectors in the West had long been in the habit of calling “Chinese furniture” as if the term were all inclusive, such elaborate examples in lacquer as had come out of China through loot or trade in the past century.²²³

George Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*, 1948.

By 1949, Gustav Ecke and George Kates had settled in North America, away from the political turmoil that destabilised China during consecutive decades of conflict. Ecke had taken a post as Curator of Chinese Art at the Honolulu Academy of Arts; from 1947 to 1949 George Kates was Curator of Oriental Art at the Brooklyn Museum of Art where he had exhibited his own furniture in 1946.²²⁴ Kates released two feature articles in *American House and Garden* magazine in 1949 and 1950 on Chinese hardwood furniture, emphasising its propitiously modern aesthetic.²²⁵ In addition, excerpts of *Chinese Household Furniture* were published between November 1949 and October 1950 in ten monthly issues of *The Antique Dealer and Collectors' Guide*. Where *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, which had reached Europe and the U.S. in only small quantity from its initial print, won favour with a more intellectual readership, *Chinese Household Furniture* which was accessibly priced and more easily obtainable through a variety of print media, engaged a wider audience. Kates traversed America giving a series of lectures in provincial art museums through which he was influential in expanding the level of popular recognition and appreciation for his subject. In 1956 Kates wrote to Sickman at the (then) Nelson Gallery of Art: “The Metropolitan invites me to lecture on Chinese Household Furniture next spring...so now I have Cleveland,

²²³ Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*, 8.

²²⁴ Details of Kates post as Curator of Oriental Art at the Brooklyn Museum subsequent to the exhibition of his furniture in 1946 are referenced at Roote, *A Love Affair with Old Beijing*, e-book location 3494 to 3524. Kates’ own autobiographical commentary on his time in China, *The Years That Were Fat: Peking, 1933-1940*, was published in 1952 but did not address his activities either at the Brooklyn Museum or after his departure from China.

²²⁵ Kates’ articles in *House and Gardens* appeared as follows: “Far East Influence in Contemporary Decoration”, *House & Garden*, April and *Collectors' Guide* 4:8 March 1950, 19-20; and “How to Recognize Chinese Household Furniture”, *House & Garden*, April 1949, 110-113, 164.

Pittsburgh and the metropolis... is a fourth possible for Kansas City: furniture, palaces or gardens?"²²⁶

Ecke and Kates' published works on Chinese hardwood furniture provided a platform for subsequent authors and researchers on which to build. As observed in the preceding chapter, *Chinese Domestic Furniture* (Ecke) and *Chinese Household Furniture* (Kates) both adopted the format employed by early twentieth-century books on Chinese (lacquered) furniture, which themselves followed the model set by commercial furniture or gallery and auction sales catalogues of summary art historical text followed by a significant number of illustrations or plates. In both cases, emphasis was placed on the photographic documentation of specific furniture pieces grouped together by function and contributed by a range of collectors with the plates accompanied by a breviloquent textual descriptor identifying materials, construction techniques and in some cases, noting the endemic function of the item in the context of its originating culture.

Chinese Domestic Furniture has been widely cited by contemporary and later critics as the more authoritative of the two works. In an article which appeared in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* in 1949 (the year following the publication of *Chinese Household Furniture*), the British sinologist and Professor of Chinese Art and Archaeology at London University, Walter Perceval Yetts (1878-1957) commented:

This neglected subject received a notable contribution lately from Professor Gustav Ecke in Peking. His *Chinese Domestic Furniture* is, I believe, the first attempt at an organized treatise. Existing literature was scanty. From Chinese sources there were sundry entries in encyclopaedias, [sic] and chance allusions and woodcuts to be found in unexpected places.²²⁷

Yetts commended Ecke's *Chinese Domestic Furniture* as a "pioneer work" and "an indispensable introduction to the craft at its best."²²⁸ His assessment of *Chinese Household Furniture*, which he described as "cover[ing] much the same ground... but... designed for the more general reader" had a less acclamatory tenor. This relatively dismissive approach to Kates's work may also reflect the personal and professional relationship between Ecke

²²⁶ Letter George Kates to Laurence Sickman. Dated 11 August 1956. Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Archives, Office of the Director Records, Laurence Sickman Records, RG2 Box 4: File 11.

²²⁷ Walter Perceval Yetts, "Concerning Chinese Furniture," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 81(3-4) (1949): 125-137.

²²⁸ Yetts, "Concerning Chinese Furniture," 125.

and Yetts. Both had published on the subject of Chinese bronzes and Ecke's academic career in China and the U.S. had propelled his status within a select group of notable European and American sinologists. In contrast, on return to America, Kates held a number of government positions before taking his short-lived position as Curator of Oriental Art at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in New York. Yetts' article was in itself contributory to the process of conveying Chinese furniture into the lexicon of art history through its incremental contribution to Western scholarship on the subject, which even by the mid-twentieth century remained at a stage of relative infancy with the literature still confined to the small number of volumes addressed in this study.

Notwithstanding the book's original contribution to its field of study and dissemination in lower cost print media, *Chinese Household Furniture* addressed a topic which at the midpoint of the twentieth century remained relatively obscure to an audience unacquainted with minor forms of Chinese art. As a result, readership and circulation were limited. Sales of the first edition were slow and to Kates' disappointment, unprofitable. Kates continued to send royalty cheques to Hedda Morrison in respect of her photographic contribution to *Chinese Household Furniture* via his sister Beatrice. In 1956, Kates sent a (presumably final) royalty cheque to Morrison via Beatrice Kates with a note: "I enclose a cheque for Hedda Hammer's account, amounting to only a few cents, as you can see, for the sales of half a year. Certainly, there is no money in the kind of writing that interests me." The paltry nature of the sums transferred to Morrison are evidence of the book's commercial shortcomings. Writing to Beatrice in October 1954 and enclosing a cheque in the sum of US\$1.54 made out to Hedda Morrison, Kates lamented: "how little are the goods of the spirit rewarded here and now!"²²⁹ By 1955, seven years after its initial publication, the first edition of *Chinese Household Furniture* had sold out, with no immediate plans for a second edition.

There are no more of the furniture books. It was sold out by last time; and no more will be printed. Its price is distinctly up; - in the art bookshops. If only we had each bought 100 copies.²³⁰

First edition copies from the original print run of 200 of Ecke's *Chinese Domestic Furniture* continued to appreciate in both value and estimation. Not long after its publication,

²²⁹ Letter to Beatrice Kates from George Kates, dated October 1954. George N. Kates letters, 1946-1960. AAA, Smithsonian Institution.

²³⁰ Letter to Beatrice Kates from George Kates, dated 11 April 1955 [emphasis Kates]. George N. Kates letters 1946-1960, Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art (AAA).

the book became a collectable item and a scarce commodity in America. A letter from George Kates to his sister Beatrice written in 1954 reads: “I have sold \$100 worth of books (including my Ecke) to Weyhe”. Kates also noted that “the Ecke alone achieved \$90.”²³¹ A letter sent to the librarian at the Brooklyn Museum from publishers P.D and Ione Perkins, California, in 1947 stated that the company had imported five copies of *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, which had sold out immediately; and that importing further copies from Beijing was proving difficult due to ongoing conflict in the surrounding area. The letter stated: “We have, since the end of hostilities, received a total of five copies of Ecke: “Chinese Furniture” [sic] and these are sold as fast as received for \$85 each. More copies were originally ordered and we have since reordered but evidently due to the private war going on in the vicinity of Peking none have come through... We can secure through Shanghai but due to inflation prices are 25-50% higher.”²³² The quoted sales price for *Chinese Domestic Furniture* in 1947 of \$85.00, equates to more than US\$1,000 at present values.²³³ Current prices for first edition copies of the book sold at auction range from between thirteen to circa times this amount, confirming the books’ status as both an investable asset and a collectable item attractive to connoisseurs of Chinese furniture.²³⁴

1. Chinese art and literature as cultural evidence for an indigenous furniture heritage

Yetts’ inference that *Chinese Household Furniture* lacked academic discipline is borne out by a lack of scholarly rigour in presentation, exemplified by Kates’ omission of a full bibliography, consistently incomplete references and the absence of proper citation of reference materials. Attribution of pictorial sources is unclear and, in some cases, omitted entirely, coinciding with Yetts’ analysis that the book was intended for a less academic readership. Kates’ more accessible approach to writing seems to have been an issue that dogged his career. Kates wrote to his sister Beatrice in 1949: “I am in the doghouse with the (illegible) for something published not sufficiently “academic.” Others vaguely admire.

²³¹ Letter from George Kates to Beatrice Kates dated July 23, George N. Kates letters, 1946-1960. AAA, Smithsonian Institution.

²³² Letter dated 28 January 1947 to Mrs Mary Dorward, Assistant Librarian at the Brooklyn Museum. File reference: Office of the Director, Correspondence 1947. Brooklyn Museum of Art Archives.

²³³ Present values are calculated on the basis of inflation at 3.51% per annum between 1947 and 2022.

²³⁴ For example, a first edition copy of *Chinese Domestic Furniture* offered for sale at Christie’s Hong Kong in 2012. Christie’s. *Important Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, Hong Kong. Lot 2321. 28 November 2012. <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5633691Hong Kong>.

Neither side influences me; one must work out one's own destiny."²³⁵ Whilst acknowledging the book's academic deficiencies Kates set a literary precedent for future studies through combining furniture research with pictorial sources of visual evidence in an attempt to provide insight to the development of styles and to evince patterns of customary social usage, presenting discursive analysis of hardwood furniture with a number of small and unattributed reproductions of literary woodcut illustrations.

In *Chinese Household Furniture*, Kates submitted that the elaborate textual descriptions of furniture which featured in classic Chinese novels, principally the Qing dynasty classic *Honglou meng* 红楼梦 (Dream of the Red Chamber) and the Ming novel *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅 (The Plum in the Golden Vase) provided a basis for further research in the absence of documentation surrounding the circumstances of production of Chinese furniture. The extensive descriptive evidence for the significance of domestic objects including furniture which features in both the *Jin Ping Mei* and *Honglou Meng* have been identified as rich sources of information and analysis on Ming and Qing material culture; Jonathan Hay has commented on the expressive potential of literary objectival references, noting that the *Jin Ping Mei* in particular serves as evidence for preferences regarding domestic interiors in the Ming dynasty.²³⁶ Although the *Jin Ping Mei* is set during the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127), it is regarded by scholars as relevant to attitudes towards material culture which developed in the Ming, contemporary with the novel's circulation during the Ming Wanli period (1573- 1620).²³⁷ Yetts and later writers were to enhance and expand on these associations, but Kates was first to observe the documentary potential of specific literary sources as evidence for the historical context, practical use, consumption and social significance conferred on various furniture types in the Ming dynasty.

Regarding the use of visual imagery as an art historical reference point, it is evident that the small-scale woodcuts featured in *Chinese Household Furniture* were the same images selected by Kates to accompany an exhibition of his furniture collection held in the Brooklyn Museum between 21 February and 21 March, 1946.²³⁸ Two of these illustrations were also featured in *The Chair in China* by Louise Hawley Stone and a third can be

²³⁵ Letter dated 5 May 1949. George N. Kates letters, 1946-1960. AAA, Smithsonian Institution.

²³⁶ Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces*, 23.

²³⁷ Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*, 6 and 15-16. For further analysis of the relevance of the novel to Ming social custom see Vesna Vučinić Nešković "Social Exchange and Power Relations in Jin Ping Mei: An Analysis of a Classic Chinese Novel." *Antropologija* 12, no. 2 (2012): 243-260. Accessed 12 June 2024. <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=802691> ; and Sophie Volpp. 2022. *The Substance of Fiction: Literary Objects in China, 1550-1775*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/volp19964>.

²³⁸ Brooklyn Museum archives; File reference: "Exhib. Chinese Furniture Dir 1945-1946". Letter from Isabel Roberts to Karl Kup, December 17, 1946.

identified from an image of the exhibition of Kates' furniture in the Brooklyn Museum in 1946. A letter in the archives of the Brooklyn Museum dated 26 January 1946 from Isabel Roberts (1911-2005) Director at the Brooklyn Museum, to Karl Kup (1903-1981) Curator of the Spencer Collection at New York Public Library requested "permission to borrow ten or fifteen items from the Spencer collection showing Chinese woodcuts."²³⁹ Roberts' letter suggests that the decision to use woodcut illustrations to fill what might otherwise have been bare gallery walls preceded the selection of the individual works. (Figure 2.1) The cover of a small pamphlet promoting the exhibition of Kates' furniture at the Brooklyn Museum featured one of the woodcut illustrations shown at the exhibition on its cover. The caption below reads "A Scholar at Home; From the *Sheung yü hsiang chieh*, ("Imperial Edicts, Illustrated"), dated as of 1861; Spencer Collection, New York Public Library". This woodcut was also used in the illustrations for *Chinese Household Furniture*. In this respect, the use of Qing woodcut illustrations in *Chinese Household Furniture*, which was published in 1948, two years after the display of Kates' furniture at the museum, may be viewed as a consequence of the exhibition. The woodcut illustrations which accompanied both the exhibition of Kates' furniture collection at the Brooklyn Museum and later the text of *Chinese Household Furniture*, set an enduring precedent which would continue to be used in the publication and display of Chinese hardwood furniture in both commercial and museum spheres. Monochrome woodcut illustrations continue to feature alongside furniture pieces in books and at exhibitions to provide both decorative effect and historical context.

2. Archaeology as evidence for Chinese furniture in the twentieth century

Yetts' "Concerning Chinese Furniture" concluded the new additions to the literature on Chinese hardwood furniture in the 1940s. Its publication appears motivated by a desire to expand on the few archaeological references for evidence of historical furniture included by Ecke in *Chinese Domestic Furniture*. Many of the objects cited by both Ecke and Yetts were relatively recent archaeological discoveries, indicating both the nascency of Chinese art historical research and a vigorous appetite in the West and China during the early twentieth century for the discovery of ancient and historically significant artworks. As Lyons and Papadopoulos commented on the surge of interest in ethnographical archaeology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: "The recovery of the non-European past was a

²³⁹ Isabel Roberts. Letter to Karl Kup. 26 January 1946. Brooklyn Museum Archives. Office of the Director Records. Isabel Spaulding Roberts (ISR) records, 1943 - 1946

project enthusiastically endorsed by Continental powers and implemented through various overseas institutes and scientific missions.” This was not unique to China but is reflective of a drive in Europe and America for the discovery of culture through material artefacts which underpinned the flow of artefacts from subordinate to dominant cultures.²⁴⁰ Continuing the precedent set by Kates and Ecke, Yetts extended the creation of a social and stylistic narrative of Chinese furniture through reference to other art forms as evidence for a comprehensive, if hypothetical, chronological history of furniture as art and a signifier of cultural development. Yetts’ research, which exceeded Kates’ in academic precision, addressed the etymology of Chinese furniture by assessing the accuracy of the characters used to represent furniture types and designs. For example, Yetts questioned Ecke’s attachment of the character (几, ji) as localised terminology for *kang* 炕 and platform or low table furniture which he stated derived from Shang dynasty (1600-1050 BCE) pictography.²⁴¹ Yetts cited a lack of available evidence for this statement, suggesting alternative attributions with radicals derived from Shang script as cited in the Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) *shuowen jiezi* 说文解字 (Chinese character dictionary) and “Oracular Sentences” from the earliest Chinese scripts engraved on bone and tortoiseshell. The characters suggested by Yetts as most applicable for the earliest of Chinese furniture types derive from the characters used for ancient three legged, two handled vessels (i.e. antique bronze cauldrons), with the effect of elevating the debate on Chinese furniture to the realm of bronzeware, the most highly regarded form of Chinese art.

“Concerning Chinese Furniture” focused primarily on the development of the most elemental prototype of early Chinese furniture which had also captivated Ecke and which has no equivalent in Western furniture; the raised platform (炕, *kang*) and its gradual evolution in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) to form the canopied or tester bed (架子床, *jiazichuang*). Yetts offered new visual and historical evidence for the establishment of a progressive change in habitual Chinese custom from kneeling (or squatting) to higher level seating and referenced a broader range of archaeological and visual sources for the development and study of Chinese furniture than either Ecke or Kates had done previously. “Concerning Chinese Furniture” serves as an archaeologically focused complement to Ecke’s overview of the functional and structural evolution of the raised platform to form the freestanding open sided platform, the most basic unit of Chinese furniture which evolved into designs for both the low table and couch. In an effort to chart the course of events by

²⁴⁰ Lyons and Papadopolous, *The Archaeology of Colonialism*, 2.

²⁴¹ Yetts, *Concerning Chinese Furniture*, 130.

which Chinese civilisation moved from floor level living (so-called ‘mat culture’) to chair level, Yetts similarly expanded on Kates’ unsupported assertion in *Chinese Household Furniture* that “the Chinese of the Han dynasty and their ancestors originally had no chairs whatsoever; this is a firmly established and important fact.”²⁴²

Of particular significance is a reference to the existence of “some damaged Sung chairs, recovered from a town buried in flood silt... in the Peking Museum.”²⁴³ A photographic record of the chairs (seemingly rendered in unlacquered wood) was later included in Louis Hawley Stone’s 1952 book *The Chair in China* with a note indicating that the chairs themselves appear to have since been lost.²⁴⁴ Stone noted that before World War Two the chairs had been in the history museum in Beijing and, according to Stone, had been unearthed some thirty years earlier by Japanese archaeologists in the excavation of a Sung site in Hopei which was assessed as having been submerged in water since 1108 CE.²⁴⁵ The deterioration of excavated softwood chairs would be unsurprising if they were removed from a previously sealed environment and exposed to oxygen. The paucity of extant Ming lacquered furniture is a result of the physical structure of softwood and lacquer rather than an indication that fine lacquered furniture in the ‘classic’ style was not constructed throughout the Ming period alongside hardwood items. In a reference borrowed from *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, Yetts cited further archaeological evidence for furniture development in the form of excavated Han funerary items, including items then recently recovered by Japanese archaeologists belonging to Chinese settlers in Korea during the Han dynasty (206 BC-220 CE).²⁴⁶ Particular note was given to “the careful technique of excavation practised by Japanese archaeologists in Corea” in preservation of ancient items. This approbatory attitude towards the capabilities of Japanese archaeologists contrasts distinctly with the popular depiction of the handling of ancient artworks by heavy-handed and commercially motivated grave robbers and antique dealers in China. Yetts gave a contrasting account of what are implied as Chinese archaeological methods: “A well-known instance of missed opportunity through lack of scientific method was the rifling of the Chint’sun tombs in Ho-nan, which date from about the fourth century, B.C. Fortunately the loss was mitigated by Bishop W. C. White’s devoted work of reconstruction on hearsay evidence.”²⁴⁷ William Charles White (1873-1960) was a missionary who served Bishop of Honan in China between 1924-1934 whilst also collecting artworks and funerary items

²⁴² Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*, 26.

²⁴³ Yetts, *Concerning Chinese Furniture*, 126.

²⁴⁴ Yetts, “Concerning Chinese Furniture,” 126.

²⁴⁵ Stone, *The Chair in China*, 21.

²⁴⁶ Yetts, “Concerning Chinese Furniture,” 126.

²⁴⁷ Yetts, “Concerning Chinese Furniture,” 126.

enabling the establishment of the Chinese collection of the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. Archaeological references offered in substantiation of the dearth of seating furniture in China before the Han dynasty included carvings and stone rubbings from Han tomb reliefs which predate surviving depictions on silk or paper. Per Yetts, “Furniture is often depicted among the Shang-tung bas reliefs from the first and second centuries, though neither Ecke nor Kates cites them.”²⁴⁸ This statement relates to Western Han dynasty (206 BCE-9 CE) stone carvings from the Xiaotang Mountain Han Shrine (孝堂山郭氏墓石祠, *Xiaotangshan gushimu shici*) in Jinan province; the Wu family shrines (武氏祠, *Wushi ci*) and the Zhu Wei shrine (朱鲋石室, *Zhuwei shishiin*) in Jiaxiang, Shandong province.²⁴⁹

Yetts submitted that the carvings provided evidence for the early use of objects antecedent to recognised seating furniture, specifically arm rests designed to provide physical support for kneeling or reclining on. He noted particularly the examples of raised platform or “dais” type furniture and eight arm rests for reclining against within the reliefs in the Wu family and Mount Xiaotang shrines in addition to the depiction of a bed supported on legs at each corner.²⁵⁰ Ecke had also addressed, though not in detail, the transition from platforms to raised beds (床, *chuang*).²⁵¹ The Wu family shrines and the Xiaotang Mountain Han Shrine were early archaeological discoveries from which the French sinologist Édouard Chavannes (1865-1918) had published rubbings in 1913. Further research and images of the shrine were referenced in Wilma Fairbank’s 1942 article, “A Structural Key to Han Mural Art” which also contained illustrations of a Han dynasty objects from The Tomb of the Painted Basket in Korea similar to those depicted in reliefs from the Zhu Wei shrine, including a low wooden table of similar spindle design to that in the bedroom scene of Gu Kaizhi’s (345-406 CE) *Admonitions of the Court Instructress*.²⁵² This resembled a line drawing featured in *Chinese Domestic Furniture* illustrating the low table in the painting reputed to be by Wang Wei (699-759 CE): *Fu Sheng Lecturing on the Book of History*, now in the collection of the Osaka City Museum of Fine Arts.²⁵³

Beyond the evidence provided by contemporary archaeological research, both Ecke and Yetts contended that no truly ancient furniture items had survived in China itself. Yetts

²⁴⁸ Yetts, “Concerning Chinese Furniture,” 128.

²⁴⁹ Yetts, “Concerning Chinese Furniture,” 128.

²⁵⁰ Yetts, “Concerning Chinese Furniture,” 126.

²⁵¹ Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 3.

²⁵² Wilma Fairbank. “A Structural Key to Han Mural Art.” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 7, no. 1 (1942): 52-88. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2717814>.

²⁵³ A further line drawing of a table of the same type exists in Wilma Fairbank’s 1942 article on the Wu Family Shrines, cited above, noted as being part of a group of Han dynasty items recovered from the Tomb of the Painted Basket in Korea.

suggested that “For greater antiquity one must go to Japan, where at Nara some Chinese furniture in the famous Sho-so-in or treasure-house may be as old as the first building put up about A.D. 756.”²⁵⁴ Similarly, in *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, Ecke presented two ancient items preserved in Japanese collections: a low cupboard in zelkova wood which he described as being an example from the early Tang dynasty (618-907 CE) which had been “preserved” in the Shosoin Repository in Nara, Japan which is also recorded by Yu-kuan Lee and dated between 672-749 CE.²⁵⁵ The item dates from the time of Tang dynasty but is Japanese. Ecke also included in *Chinese Domestic Furniture* a line drawing of a small table stated as being of Japanese origin and following early Ming precedent which he procured from an undated Tokyo auction catalogue, presumably in a private collection. (Figure 2.2) An earlier example than those presented by either Ecke or Yetts is in the collection of the Fogg Harvard Art Museum. (Figure 2.3) The Harvard collection contains a red lacquer table dated to the Han dynasty, likely excavated from a tomb in Korea and an alternate example to another early table from the same tomb depicted as a line drawing illustration and included as an example of early Chinese furniture by Ecke, Yetts and Fairbank. (Figure 2.4) The Fogg Museum table was sold in 1941 by the Asian art dealership Yamanaka & Co. to Grenville Lindall Winthrop (1864-1943), a noted Harvard alumni who bequeathed his collection of outstanding Chinese bronzes to the Fogg Museum in 1943.²⁵⁶ The Han dynasty lacquer table appears to have been among this group and its existence seems to have been entirely overlooked by historians of Chinese furniture, though not by lacquer experts, perhaps because it had already arrived in America by this time and was considered as being of archaeological rather than stylistic relevance.²⁵⁷

3. Material bias and historical significance: Evidence for early furniture in China

Furniture items which predate the Ming substantiate the constancy of classical furniture design across millennia and through a transition from lacquer as the prevailing medium for fine furniture to the increased use of hardwood for furniture production in affluent households. However, the absence of earlier hardwood pieces also provides clear indication that the use of fine quality, plain hardwood furniture is a later concept, probably

²⁵⁴ Yetts, *Concerning Chinese Furniture*, 126.

²⁵⁵ Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 19 and Fig. 7. Yu-kuan Lee. 1972. *Oriental Lacquer Art*. New York: Weatherill. 295.

²⁵⁶ Wilma Fairbank. 1972. *Adventures in Retrieval: Han Murals and Shang Bronze Molds*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. 33

²⁵⁷ The Fogg Museum table is featured in Lee, *Oriental Lacquer Art*, 294.

deriving from the Ming dynasty for the reasons cited above. Lacquered furniture, aside from offering a myriad of possibilities for surface decoration, had the advantage of exceptional stability able to withstand China's humidity and extremes of temperature; physical and climactic factors presented a challenge to the permanence of uncoated soft wood structures. The relative durability of lacquer made it a practical and obvious material for items intended for both internal and external use. In addition, lacquer could be layered on top of indigenous softwoods in abundant supply such as bamboo or fast-growing softer hardwoods including elm and paulownia which were readily and economically available within China. Lee Yu-kuan: "In the early periods which include the Sung dynasty, soft woods were used in the making of lacquer furniture... because hardwoods were not a native product of China."²⁵⁸ The latter part of this statement disregards the documented existence and procurement of hardwoods from Hainan Island and Southern China noted in the first chapter of this thesis. As Alan and Camille Fung have written: "The tree was never cultivated by the Chinese and was confined to the lower hills and valleys in regions of the South China Sea, particularly in Hainan Island and Guangdong Province, but it was in no region abundant."²⁵⁹ However, despite the presence of tropical hardwoods in Hainan and Southern China, the majority of hardwoods are produced from deciduous trees and it is an established fact that much of China's historic deciduous forests were cleared by the start of the late Neolithic period (c.5000 BCE) to provide land for agricultural development.²⁶⁰

Early writers on the subject of Chinese furniture largely omitted to consider the existence of lacquered furniture which was perceived as representative of the decorative tastes of a previous generation of Western Chinese art collectors. It is a reasonable hypothesis that to those at the vanguard of creativity in the early-mid twentieth century, lacquer furniture would have been reminiscent of a taste for Victoriana and chinoiserie antithetical to modern design ideologies in the mid-century. Whilst the reverberative impact of Modernism on the collecting of Chinese hardwood furniture will be discussed in more detail later in this study, it seems clear that a fundamental aesthetic predilection compelled Ecke, Kates, Yetts and later writers to seek to establish that hardwood, rather than lacquer furniture, *was* Chinese furniture. This omission is indicative also of the relative paucity of knowledge in this early period of research, which was predicated largely on items which could be viewed in Beijing in upper class family homes and former imperial residences or procured from antique shops mostly in the Chinese capital. Redolent of a substantive

²⁵⁸ Lee, *Oriental Lacquer Arts*, 286.

²⁵⁹ Alan and Camille Fung "*Huanghual*", 41.

²⁶⁰ For more on this topic see David Joel Cohen. "The Beginnings of Agriculture in China: A Multiregional View." *Current Anthropology* 52, no. S4 (2011): S273-93. <https://doi.org/10.1086/659965>.

aesthetic preference and selective bias towards furniture constructed in hardwood, the exclusion of lacquer from Chinese furniture books and collections engendered a false perception of the homogeneity of fine furniture production centred around non-indigenous wood species.

As early Western proponents and chroniclers of Chinese furniture, the historiographic contributions of Ecke and Yetts were additive in their attempt to chart an evolution of furniture styles and the classicism of Chinese design. Both writers neglected to mention - or perhaps failed to appreciate - that the use of hardwood represented an evolution in materials which served as testament to the dynamic of Chinese social and political history. Even during the Ming and Qing dynasties, when literati lifestyle texts evince the desirability among literati circles for furnishings in particular species of hardwood, lacquered furniture continued to be produced, used and appreciated alongside that made in plain hardwood. As Craig Clunas has stated, woodblock prints do not give a clear indication of materials used in furniture scenes, although the author notes that “at least one western writer has chosen to assume they invariably show hardwood furniture.”²⁶¹ Being far fewer in number, extant ‘classic’ furniture objects constructed in lacquered wood, typified by a rare Ming lacquer altar table with scroll ends which has been in private collections since the 1980s, were not included alongside hardwood examples.²⁶² (Figure 2.5)

As the C.L. Ma collection of furniture from Shanxi province demonstrates, lacquered surface offered myriad possibilities for decorative surface treatments, including carving, inlay and painting, typically dating from the Yuan Dynasty.²⁶³ The collection contains some of the earliest extant pieces of Chinese furniture which are constructed in lacquered softwood. Although most scholarship has focused on the decorative and archaeological aspects of lacquer, consideration of the structural form of both actual and representative lacquered furniture pieces is critical in demonstrating the stylistic continuation of classical Chinese furniture design. For example, a dated Yuan dynasty carved lacquer table excavated in Gansu province from the tomb of Wang Weixian 汪惟贤 (1249-1306) displays many of the elements which characterise ‘classical’ Chinese hardwood furniture design; including double rectangular stretchers, gently splayed legs and flat shaped mitred spandrelled

²⁶¹ Craig Clunas, *Chinese Furniture*, 13.

²⁶² Sotheby's, Hong Kong. *Curiosity IV*, 1 April 2018. Black lacquer altar table, Ming dynasty, lot 3042. <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2018/curiosity-iv-hk0793/lot.3042.html>

²⁶³ Curtis Everts. 1999. *C.L. Ma Traditional Chinese Furniture from the Greater Shanxi Region*. Hong Kong: C.L. Ma Furniture.

apron.²⁶⁴ (Figure 2.6) A further cabriole leg red lacquer table with inscribed *dali* marble top is described by Lee as dated to the Song dynasty and bears many of the stylistic features of hardwood furniture, including finely beaded edging, scroll pattern motifs and cloud shaped ornamental elements. (Figure 2.7) Another Yuan dynasty lacquered piece from Lee's personal collection with inlaid peony and butterfly design was included in *Oriental Lacquer Arts*, substantiating the availability of a limited number of lacquered furniture items from periods earlier than Ming.²⁶⁵ (Figure 2.8) Lee reminds the reader that China's shifting political and areal boundaries and the resultant commercial, social and cultural vicissitudes of the Song and Yuan dynasties combined with the reception of tributary gifts from foreign states and relaxation of maritime trading laws in the later Ming dynasty were contributory factors to the availability of foreign hardwoods, commencing from around the time of the early 14th century.²⁶⁶

This in turn led to a change in preferential taste for materials for furnishings. Whilst noting this change in materials the same classical designs and motifs that characterised early lacquer furniture remained consistent. The use of lacquer as the pre-eminent material for furniture production prior to the Ming dynasty is borne out by depictions in paintings from preceding dynasties. Although the lack of certitude and reliability in dating and prevalence of copying and stylistic interpretation in Chinese painting, a number of works may be called on to substantiate this point: in the Song dynasty copy of Yan Liben's 阎立本 (c.600-673 CE) Tang dynasty (618-907) scroll painting, *Lidai diwang tujuan* 历代帝王图卷 (The Thirteen Emperors), now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, three emperors are shown seated on red lacquer platforms.²⁶⁷ (Figure 2.9) Similarly, a copy of *Hanxizai yeyan tujuan* 韩熙载夜宴图卷 (The Night Revels of Han Xizai) in the Palace Museum, attributed to Gu Hongzhong 顾闳中 (c.910-980), shows an interior scene dominated by various items of domestic furniture, entirely in black lacquer with the exception of a red lacquer stand in the lower right. (Figure 2.10) Numerous Song dynasty paintings on the theme of literary gatherings, including a painting of this name purported to be by the Northern Song Emperor Huizong 宋徽宗 (r.1100-1126) (Figure 2.11); and a hanging scroll painting entitled *Tang*

²⁶⁴ James C. Y. Watt, Maxwell K Hearn, and Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, N.Y.). 2010. *The World of Khubilai Khan: Chinese Art in the Yuan Dynasty*. New York, New Haven Conn: Metropolitan Museum of Art: Yale University Press. 293.

²⁶⁵ Lee, *Oriental Lacquer Arts*, 306. Also illustrated in Michel Beurdeley, *The Chinese Collector through the Ages*, 46. The table was for a time in the collection of Arthur Sackler.

²⁶⁶ Lee, *Oriental Lacquer Arts*, 236.

²⁶⁷ Yan Liben, *The Thirteen Emperors*, Tang dynasty (618-907). Handscroll, ink and colour on silk, 51.3 x 531.c.m. Paul and Helen Bernat Gallery, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Accession No. 31.643. <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/29071>

wuxueshi tu 唐五学士图 (Five Tang Scholars) by Liu Songnian 刘松年 (1155-1224) (Figure 2.12) both in the National Palace Museum in Taipei, attest to the dominance of lacquer furniture in both imperial and scholarly settings, as well as to the historical consistency of classical furniture design.²⁶⁸

As set out above, the apparent bias towards hardwood over lacquered furniture results from several factors, notably an explicit aesthetic preference and a narrow frame of reference against which to benchmark craftsmanship. Ian Lustick has commented on the manifestation of discriminatory selection bias in the choice of records used to chart seemingly neutral transoceanic social histories. Lustick questions: “for any historically grounded social scientific research, how is the background historical narrative which is to serve as the empirical referent in the investigation to be chosen, discovered, or manufactured? Which sources are to be consulted, which used, which discarded?”²⁶⁹ The same reasoning can be applied to object-based collecting and literary compilations of objects which act as “historical referents” in Lustick’s theory. In charting a history of Chinese furniture, categorised under a collective designation by virtue of stylistic similarity, Kates, Ecke and their contemporaries demonstrated an innate preference or taste which culminated in the creation of a group of objects selected by reference to a vocabulary composed of a finite number of indicators. These included the selection of a circumscribed number of elite materials and form types (for example, *zitan* and *huanghuali*, horseshoe chair, round cornered cupboard, compound cabinets and so on) and design elements such as horse hoof leg, carved scrolls, clouds, *kui* 夔 dragons; discreet beading and *baitong* 白铜 hardware.

In the search for analogous objects which offer historical insight to the structural development of common furniture forms, in particular the early dais or raised platform, neither Ecke, Kates nor Yetts made the association between the development of early kang furniture and the raised games tables used for the ancient Chinese strategy games “go” (围棋, *weiqui*) also known by the shortened name of chess (棋, *qi*) and board game (六博, *liubo*). A richly documented physical archive of early games tables recovered from tombs predating the Han dynasty exists, which display strong visual resemblance to the platform structures illustrated in *Chinese Domestic Furniture* and are similar in essential architectonic

²⁶⁸ Attributed to the Song Emperor Huizong; *Literary Gathering*, Five Dynasties period (906-960). Handscroll, ink and colour on silk. 1844 x 123.9 c.m. National Palace Museum, Taipei. Liu Songnian, *Five Tang Scholars*. Hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk. 174.7 x 106.6 c.m. National Palace Museum, Taipei. <http://www.chinaonlinemuseum.com/painting-liu-songnian-five-tang-scholars.php>

²⁶⁹ Lustick, “History, Historiography, and Political Science, 605-18.

formation to the bronze table referenced by Ecke in *Chinese Domestic Furniture*.²⁷⁰ Early examples of the raised boards used to play both *weiqi* and the ancient game of *liubo* demonstrate that these functioned as low tables in front of which players would sit or kneel. The form of many of these games boards serves as a direct antecedent to platforms and later *kang* tables, raised at each of four corners on short legs which formed part of the apron. The connection between early low tables for use on the *kang* and games boards is amply demonstrated by a number of pottery tomb models dated to the Han dynasty and earlier which feature players sitting at (or more infrequently on) a raised platform upon which the features of the game board are incised. The MMA collection contains a Han dynasty tomb model consisting of two kneeling figures; a *liubo* board raised at each corner to form a low table and the sticks that players must throw to determine the outcome of the game.²⁷¹ (Figure 2.13) This set coincides in date with the earliest extant lacquer tables; however, a number of earlier bronze, stone and lacquer *liubo* boards, elevated on three or four legs have been found in tombs dating to the Warring States period (476-221 B.C.E) and the Early Western Han (206-168 BCE).²⁷² (Figure 2.14)

An early example of a *weiqi* board, raised on four legs in the form of a low table, excavated in 1952 and dated to the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220 CE) (Figure 2.15) attests to the relationship between the structural development of the board and early furniture archetypes.²⁷³ (Figure 2.16) A further *weiqi* board tomb model in the Henan Museum, excavated in 1959 and dated to the Sui Dynasty (581-618 CE) (Figure 2.17) parallels the form of the spandrelled platform with shaped and cusped detailing on the top frame section.²⁷⁴ The relevance of these early raised boards to the historiography of classical furniture is further reinforced by the presence of hardwood games tables from the Ming and Qing dynasties at full height, present in collections of Chinese classical furniture. The playing boards of these later tables closely resemble the design and structure of earlier raised *liubo* or *weiqi* boards. Although the educational and social significance of the games of *liubo*

²⁷⁰ Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 4. A concise history of *weiqi* and *liubo* is provided in Lien (2006). Edmund Y. Lien. "Wei Yao's Disquisition on Boyi." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 126, no. 4 (2006): 567-78. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20064544>

²⁷¹ *Liubo* board, dice and playing pieces; and pair of seated figures. Han dynasty (206 B.CE-A.D. 220), Tomb Pottery, Earthenware with pigment. 35.1x34.6 c.m. Accession no.1992.165.23a, b, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/44732>

²⁷² Black and red lacquer *liubo* set, Early Western Han dynasty, (206-168 B.CE) Hunan Museum collection, Changsha, Hunan. Source: <http://www.hnmuseum.com/en/gallery/node/1048/1>

²⁷³ Burial model of *liubo*-players, game board and table. Eastern Han Dynasty, Glazed earthenware. Royal Ontario Museum of Art, Object No. 992.78.1.3. <https://collections.rom.on.ca/objects/518650/burial-model-of-liuboplayers-game-board-and-table?ctx=52d36605-5e71-4b22-be06-962f9b054f62&idx=62>

²⁷⁴ White glazed Sui dynasty porcelain *weiqi* board. Tomb model. Excavated in 1959 at the Zhangsheng Tomb, Anyang, Henan. Sui and Tang Dynasties Hall, Henan Museum, Zhengzhou, Henan. Source: http://www.chnmus.net/sitesources/hnsbwy/page_pc/dzjp/mzyp/bycwqp/list1.html

and *weiqi* have been considered in a number of academic studies, the boards themselves have not been the subject of significant art historical research either independently or in relation to early furniture (with the caveat that only English language sources have been thoroughly explored) restricting analysis to pictorial and anecdotal visual evidence. More recently, Sarah Handler has noted briefly the existence of a set of Han dynasty pottery figures excavated from a tomb in Lingbao, Henan, seated on a raised platform with a *liubo* board lying flat between them.²⁷⁵ (Figure 2.18) It therefore seems appropriate to consider how these games boards serve as potential historic antecedents, overlooked by earlier writers, which should also be considered among the earliest extant archetypes of later furniture.

4. Institutionalisation and commercialisation from the mid-20th century

Until the late 1940s much of the limited body of literature addressing ‘classic’ Chinese furniture was written by American and European academics who had been present in China before the establishment of the PRC and had accumulated and witnessed furniture in use at first hand in that country. Spurred by Ecke and Kates’ writing and by the few concomitant exhibitions on Chinese hardwood furniture in American museums, interest from outside China escalated moderately between 1950 and 1970.²⁷⁶ In addition to the exhibition of Kates’ furniture at the Brooklyn Museum, an exhibition of the John F. Kullgren (1906-1976) collection of Chinese furniture ran from 1942-1948 at LACMA. Additions to the Western literature on classical Chinese furniture dating from the 1950s and 60s, though few in number, show that the early historiography on the subject had begun to create momentum.

Ensuing publications on Chinese furniture expounded either Ecke’s scholarly, art-historicising precedent or Kates’ aesthetic discourse on the design and surface appeal of Chinese classical furniture. Louise Hawley Stone’s *The Chair in China*, a small hardback book published in 1952 by the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, built on the earlier writing of Ecke and Yetts through engagement with archaeological and historical visual evidence to further chart the course of furniture evolution as both indicator and instigator of shifting

²⁷⁵ Sarah Handler, “On a New World Arose the Kang Table.” *Journal of the Classical Chinese Furniture Society*, Summer 1992, 22-47.

²⁷⁶ A letter dated 24 March 1949 to Kates at the Brooklyn Museum from Mr. Vernon Wood of North Vine Street, Hollywood, refers to a show of the John F. Kullgren (1906-1976) collection of Chinese furniture on display from 1942-1948 at the Los Angeles County Museum stating that the collection had since been placed in storage at the museum. Brooklyn Museum Archives, File reference: Chinese HH Furniture Correspondence, A/SIE 1947-49.

social customs in China. Stone nonetheless named *Chinese Household Furniture* as a key antecedent source for her research and included a number of the same woodcut illustrations featured by Kates in *Chinese Household Furniture*, this time identified with full citations:

The two best, if not the only books on the subject available in a Western language are Gustav Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, (Peking, 1944); and George Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*, (N. Y., 1948). The information in this note is derived from the latter.²⁷⁷

As Stone observed, *Chinese Domestic Furniture* and *Concerning Chinese Furniture* focused their analysis on the development of low platform style furniture (“the box construction and its platform derivatives”) for a variety of uses on both the kang or floor, which evolved to form the stool and low kang table, for use whilst kneeling or sitting.²⁷⁸ Stone’s short monograph was positioned to extend this chronological narrative of development of a single furniture type to establish a logical course from mat-level sitting to the use of fully formed chairs with backs and armrests. Following Yetts’ example, Stone sought to identify the transformations in both furnishings and customs that resulted in the Chinese adopting a higher level of daily custom and ritual than was the practice in neighbouring countries where for the most part, day-to-day life continued to take place at floor level. Even in Japan, perceived in the West as anthropologically coreferential to China, daily habits of eating, sleeping and sitting traditionally took place at mat level on the tatami.

Yetts had asserted that “anciently the Chinese lived low in their dwellings. The factor that ultimately raised the level was the introduction of the chair from abroad, perhaps about the second century.” The use of chairs for sitting to accomplish daily tasks elevated the Chinese above geographically adjacent Asian cultures and in a literal sense placed them level with Western cultures. The question of how and from where the chair and its customary use arrived in China was one which captivated writers on the topic, propelled also by use of the curious terminology *hu chuang* 胡床 to describe the folding chair, translating literally to “barbarian bed” indicative of the lack of indigenous terminology for an alien item introduced from abroad. To early commentators, the prefix *hu* signified non-Chineseness - ‘barbarian’ in Western terminology. In actuality, use of the prefix ‘*hu*’ typically referred to non-Han Chinese tribes from territories now at the geographical periphery of modern China but within

²⁷⁷ Stone, *The Chair in China*, ix.

²⁷⁸ Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 3.

China's borders. To early commentators such as Yetts, the idea that the chair may have been an organic development motivated by practical need appeared unlikely, possibly running counter to implicit popular tendencies of racial opinion regarding the Chinese demonstrable even among sinologists and historians of Chinese art.²⁷⁹ As Constance Chen has noted, where "an Asian country's material culture was defined solely in ethnographic terms, the implication was that its creators lacked the comparable level of aesthetic imagination and ingenuity that their Western counterparts possessed, thereby reifying the chasm between the supposedly primitive East and the civilised West."²⁸⁰ Chen has written further about the sentiment in America at the turn of the 20th Century towards China and its failure to keep pace with modernity in contrast with the modernising impact of the Meiji Restoration in Japan. Lenore Metrick-Chen has commented on the institutionalised distrust of the Chinese between 1870-1932 which led to the racial exclusion and segregation of Chinese workers living in America. She argues that the perception of the Chinese nationality as divergent undesirables and ensuing racial tensions impacted the reception of artworks in America, whereas there were favourable opinions of Japanese artwork which was popularly regarded as possessing superior artistry and quality.²⁸¹

Stone was neither a collector nor an academic but was recognised as a generous benefactor of Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum where she studied under Bishop William White. *The Chair in China* represented the culmination of her M.A. thesis, as Ecke observed in his gently derisive review, published in *Artibus Asiae* in 1954. Ecke complemented Stone for having elected to write about Chinese chair design, and to have augmented the selection of illustrated examples drawn from her personal collection. His review described Stone as "a gentle woman of impeccable taste... a collector and interior designer of profound experience. The author's vocation is not that of an archaeologist... whenever critical attributions or historic problems are in question she has to rely on her academic advisors." Ecke continued to point out where he had directed Stone in conversation in her research and where it contradicted his own work and to identify several evidently bogus illustrated stone rubbings which she had incorrectly labelled as Han dynasty.²⁸² Stone's publication was ostensibly motivated by an interest in Kates' and Ecke's earlier writing and a desire to expand on their observations through analysis of recently collected objects in Canadian

²⁷⁹ Yetts, *Concerning Chinese Furniture*, 126.

²⁸⁰ Constance J. S. Chen. "Merchants of Asianness: Japanese Art Dealers in the United States in the Early Twentieth Century." *Journal of American Studies* 44, no. 1 (2010): 19-46. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40648687>. 27.

²⁸¹ Lenore Metrick-Chen. 2012. *Collecting Objects / Excluding People: Chinese Subjects and American Visual Culture, 1830-1900*. Albany: State University of New York Press. doi:10.1353/book19308.

²⁸² Ecke, Gustav. "The Chair in China by Louise Hawley Stone". *Artibus Asiae* 17, no. 1 (1954): 73-75. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3248954>. Accessed 17.09.2020.

collections, in particular those in the Asian collection of the Royal Ontario Museum. As a significant patron of the museum, Stone was not an ordinary M.A. student: the books' list of acknowledgements includes some of the most internationally respected authorities on Chinese art, though it is noticeable that her acknowledgements or references evidence no input or contact with Chinese sources.²⁸³ Stone established the Far Eastern Endowment Fund at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto and the Louise Hawley Stone Chair of Far Eastern Art; she was on the Museum's board and periodically chaired the Bishop White Committee. Stone's mentor, Bishop White, had served as the Museum's buying agent in China and was identified as a prolific collector of Chinese art, though in more recent years the ethics of his methods of procuring cultural relics and artworks in China on behalf of the museum have been questioned.²⁸⁴ Ecke's review pointed out the obvious defects in Stone's monograph including her reliance on unsubstantiated sources in archaeological attributions in what he termed a "large field of delightful investigation." Whilst it was clear that Ecke considered Stone academically underqualified for the task she had awarded herself, *The Chair in China* contributed to the advancement of a historicizing body of literature that sought to delineate an art historical framework against which to contextualise both her own and the Royal Ontario Museum's collection.

Louise Hawley Stone's short survey on the development of *The Chair in China* was expanded and enlarged by the British sinologist and historian C.P. Fitzgerald's longer monograph, *Barbarian Beds: The Origin of the Chair in China*, published fourteen years later in 1966. Fitzgerald continued Stone's attempt to identify an external source of import for the practice of sitting at raised level on fixed, rather than folding seating furniture. Although the outcome of both studies was suggestive rather than conclusive on this point, Fitzgerald made a number of observations with reference to an evidence-based survey of historic literature and paintings that usefully added new academic reference material enhancing the anthropological study of Chinese furniture. For example, Fitzgerald referenced an essay *Guizuo baishuo* 跪坐拜说 (Discussion - kneeling seated respectfully) in *Huian xiansheng zhuwengong wenji* 晦庵先生朱文公文集 (Collected works of Master Zhu) written by the Song Dynasty scholar Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) describing the historic manner of sitting on mats to his students at the *Bailudong shuyuan* 白鹿洞书院 (White Deer

²⁸³ Stone's acknowledgements included Basil Gray, then Keeper of Oriental Antiquities at the British Museum; Daniel Sheets Dye (West China Union University, Sichuan province, China); Langdon Warner and George Kates, described as "recently Curator, Chinese Department, Brooklyn Museum", though in fact he departed that position in 1949, three years preceding publication of Stone's book. Stone, *The Chair in China*, ix.

²⁸⁴ See Linfu Dong, *Cross Culture and Faith: The Life and Work of James Mellon Menzies*. University of Toronto Press, 2005.

Grotto Academy). For Fitzgerald, this reference to archaic rituals of sitting at mat level indicates that “the custom of sitting on floor mats was extinct and only of antiquarian interest to his contemporaries.”²⁸⁵

Fitzgerald developed an obsession with China during his early years in London which stemmed from a strong interest in current affairs.²⁸⁶ He recorded his interest in China as stimulated by a series of articles in *The Times* about the Manchu Restoration in 1917, likely written by G.E. Morrison (1862-1920) who was at that time the newspaper’s China correspondent. Fitzgerald was born in London and lived in China and Australia. He spent the years between 1923 and 1928 in Shanghai employed as a clerk in an American hotdog factory whilst studying Chinese before returning to London to take a diploma in Mandarin at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS).²⁸⁷ During this sojourn in London he published two books on Chinese history before returning to China in 1930. Fitzgerald’s early works were *Son of Heaven; a Biography of Li Shih-Min, Founder of the T’ang Dynasty*, published by Cambridge University Press in 1933; and *China, a Short Cultural History*, published by the Cresset Press in 1935. This latter book was written at the invitation of Professor Charles Seligman (1873-1940), a member of the prestigious Karlbeck Syndicate and a prolific collector of oriental and Chinese art, notably porcelain.²⁸⁸ The success of his second book, *China, A Short Cultural History* in 1935 established Fitzgerald’s reputation as a historian.

Although their time in China evidently did not coincide and there is no record of contact between the two, as authors, collectors and experts on Chinese furniture, Kates and Fitzgerald presented distinct approaches to their overlapping subject matter. Both had gone to China at a time of opportunity when due to the relative purchasing strength of the British pound and US dollar, they could afford to live well despite severely restricted financial circumstances. China afforded greater access to social and academic opportunities than either could have sustained in their respective countries of origin, having significant

²⁸⁵ Fitzgerald, *Barbarian Beds*, 39 and 1n1. See also John Kieschnick, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. 223-4, which also references Zhu Xi’s *Zhuzi jiali* 朱子家禮 [Master Zhu’s Family Rituals] on the same topic. Title translation from the 1532 Ming Dynasty publication *Zhuxi Wenji* 朱熹文集 [Collected Works of Zhu Xi]
https://baike.sogou.com/m/fullLemma?lid=63485090&g_ut=3

²⁸⁶ Sound recording of an interview with Fitzgerald at 0:10:55., C. P. (Charles Patrick) FitzGerald 1902-1992 & Turner, Ann, 1929-2011. (1992). C.P. FitzGerald interviewed by Ann Turner [sound recording].
<http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-216949440>

²⁸⁷ Dates for Fitzgerald’s first visit to China are provided in William Sima. *China & ANU: Diplomats, Adventurers, Scholars*. 2015. Acton, A.C.T: ANU Press. Per sound recording of an interview with Anne Turner, 1992, at 0:05:55, Fitzgerald studied at SOAS in London which at the time was attached to the University of London and permitted only to award diplomas rather than degrees.

²⁸⁸ According to Anne Turner sound recording (1992) at 08:31.

aspirations but limited means. Both men had gone to China for no apparent cause other than curiosity and personal interest, later examining the same rhetorical question, “Why China?” in their respective autobiographies.²⁸⁹ Despite academic credentials from Harvard and Oxford, Kates was apparently impelled by the material comfort of childhood circumstances and the prestige and surface appeal of his early Hollywood career rather than by the rigours of academia. Roote’s biographical account outlines an idiosyncratic, undisciplined approach to scholarship and a persistent lack of funds misaligned with his social aspirations.²⁹⁰ In contrast, Fitzgerald’s impoverished familial circumstances and lack of early educational opportunity appear to have motivated him to gravitate towards an academic career.²⁹¹ During his second trip to China in 1946, Fitzgerald moved to Nanjing to work for the British Council, where he lived opposite the Australian legation. Two years later, he was invited by Professor Douglas Copland (1894-1971) to participate in the establishment of a school of Oriental Studies at the new Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra, where he subsequently became Professor and Chair of the Department of Far Eastern History. Copland was appointed as the first Australian Minister to China in 1946, a post he held until 1948 when he departed China for Australia to become the first vice Chancellor of the ANU.²⁹²

Further similarity existed between Kates and Fitzgerald in their collecting activity with both acquiring good quality ‘classical’ hardwood furniture during their time in China. Whilst *Barbarian Beds* did not record Fitzgerald’s collecting activity, items from his collection have since been sold at auction. That parts of his collection were acquired posthumously by Ellsworth and other significant commercial experts in Chinese furniture attests to the calibre of these pieces and demonstrates that Fitzgerald was known in the field to have accumulated a collection of high-quality items.²⁹³ Kates and Fitzgerald shared a common affinity and warmth towards their Chinese counterparts and exhibited an earnest appreciation for Chinese culture. In Australia, Fitzgerald would later acquire a reputation as an advocate and supporter of the Chinese Communist Party after the formation of the PRC

²⁸⁹ Kates, *The Years That Were Fat*, 3. Kates claimed this question was asked repeatedly of him by “censorious uncles” and other interested parties. Fitzgerald took the same question as the title of his autobiography: Charles Patrick Fitzgerald. 1985. *Why China? Recollections of China 1923-50*. Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press.

²⁹⁰ Kates’ privileged early life and later impoverished circumstances are described in detail in Roote, *A Love Affair with Old Beijing*, E-book location 2277-2521.

²⁹¹ Finnane’s obituary of Fitzgerald notes that he could not afford to study at university. Antonia Finnane. 1992. “C.P. Fitzgerald 1902-1992.” *Australian Historical Studies* 25 (99): 325-26 (325) doi:10.1080/10314619208595914.

²⁹² Sima. *China & ANU*, 60.

²⁹³ Some of the pieces acquired by Ellsworth were retained in his personal collection and formed part of a high-profile sale at Christie’s on 18 March 2015 in New York, following his death. Lot number 134, for example, in this sale “a set of four large *huanghuali* stools” attests to the quality of Fitzgerald’s collection.

in 1949.²⁹⁴ *Barbarian Beds* was Fitzgerald's only book on Chinese art of any genre and his interest can be presumed to derive from a combination of his personal collecting activities and professional scholarship on Chinese history.

The book was divided into three main sections. The first section addressed the historical 'problem' of the arrival and presence of seated furniture in China and the question of which foreign source of import had led to the adoption of higher-level seating with legs at right angles to the floor. Further sections of the book were devoted to the development of the folding chair (胡床, *hu chuang*); and the chair (椅, *yǐ*). Synonymous with his formal academic pursuits, Fitzgerald based his observations on the development of both types of chair on an analysis of historical literary and pictorial evidence. In light of Fitzgerald's favourable stance towards China it is unsurprising that he positions the Chinese adoption of higher-level seating from an ethnographically positive perspective, noting that the Chinese were more advanced in their custom as: "the only people in the Eastern half of Asia who, before modern times, used chairs. All other peoples sat on the floor; on mats, carpets or on cushions," although he acknowledged that the use of chairs in China did not predate the Song. Fitzgerald suggested that "the change to chairs can be dated with precision to the two hundred years between the middle of the ninth century and the middle of the eleventh century."²⁹⁵

Continuing Stone's earlier investigation, Fitzgerald weighed evidence for the materialisation of seating furniture in Chinese social and ceremonial custom as an import from a foreign and implicitly more advanced culture. He disputed a statement from an earlier publication, *A Short History of Chinese Civilisation*, by Dr Richard Wilhelm which argued that "Chairs did not exist at that date [i.e., the Sung dynasty] in China. People sat on mats as they still do in Japan."²⁹⁶ In evidence for his assertion that the use of chairs in China could be dated to the Song dynasty, Fitzgerald noted that the Song dynasty essay *Gui zuo bai shuo* 跪坐拜說 (Discussion - kneeling seated respectfully) described the historic way of sitting on mats to his students. Fitzgerald regarded this as evidence that "the custom of sitting on

²⁹⁴ As has been noted already, Kates described himself as more apt to socialise with the Chinese than the majority of Westerners living in Beijing at that time (Kates, *The Years That Were Fat*, 13 and 81). Sima (2015) recounts a number of incidents confirming Fitzgerald's sympathy for the Chinese Communist Party, giving rise to conjecture that he might have been gathering intelligence for the Chinese. Sima, *China & ANU*, 96-98.

²⁹⁵ Fitzgerald, *Barbarian Beds*, 1.

²⁹⁶ Richard Wilhelm. 1929. *A Short History of Chinese Civilisation*. English translation by Joan Joshua. London: G.G. Harrap & Co. Ltd. 98.

floor mats was extinct and only of antiquarian interest to his contemporaries.” In other words, sitting on chairs was an established custom by the Song dynasty.²⁹⁷

However, contrary to Stone’s conclusion, he noted that there are actually two chair types in Chinese history: the *hu chuang* or ‘barbarian bed’ which is synonymous with the folding camp stool style in earlier use but typically associated with functional, outside seating for transportation on military campaigns and the later derived fixed frame chair for domestic use.²⁹⁸ Regarding the adoption of the term ‘yi’ 椅, which derived from the verb ‘to lean’, to describe this latter type, he surmised “...it is clear that the Chinese anciently had no words for chairs of any description.”²⁹⁹ Based on these etymological circumstances (with ‘*hu chuang*’ indicative of foreign origin and ‘yi’ having a Chinese root) Fitzgerald suggested that the folding camp stool style was conceived through an external source and developed entirely separately from the rigid frame chair with back. He concluded: “The Yi or frame chair first appears in China (with one doubtful unspecified exception) in the ninth century, more than four hundred years after the introduction of the *hu chuang*.”³⁰⁰ Fitzgerald interpreted this fact as an indication that the fixed frame chair was probably an organic development which took place within China; and the folding cross-framed stool a foreign invention.³⁰¹

Although he noted that the chair had been in general use since medieval times in Europe (476-1453) Fitzgerald suggested that there had been no contact between Europe and China “north of Byzantium” which could have served a conduit for the design of the chair to be conveyed into Chinese consciousness. Similarly, he noted that the term *jiao yi* 交椅 (cross chair) replaced the nomenclature *hu chuang* after the designation ‘yi’ came into general use to describe the fixed frame chair.³⁰² As Wu Tung has pointed out, a further type of imported chair appeared in China from Central Asia. The Buddhist pedestal or throne (须弥座, *xumizu*), evidenced in cave painting deriving from at least the sixth century, is closely

²⁹⁷ Fitzgerald, *Barbarian Beds*, 1.

²⁹⁸ Fitzgerald, *Barbarian Beds*, 5. Examples of low-backed chairs or raised platforms for seating, similar to the so called “meditation chair” are plentiful in earlier Buddhist art though usually show the Bodhisattvas or other Buddhist deities seated in a cross-legged position rather than seated with legs vertical to the ground.

²⁹⁹ Fitzgerald, *Barbarian Beds*, 6.

³⁰⁰ Fitzgerald, *Barbarian Beds*, 4-5. Fitzgerald also cited an article published in 1948 “in the Peking University Press by Associate Professor Yang Yueh illustrating a number of pieces of furniture including two T’ang chairs. One is stated as being in Japan and the other from a Tang painting - neither origin cited.”

³⁰¹ Fitzgerald, *Barbarian Beds*, 33.

³⁰² Fitzgerald, *Barbarian Beds*, 5.

related to both carved architectural features and to the later design of waisted Chinese furniture.³⁰³

5. From scholarly beginnings to collectable commodity: Dealer literature from Ellsworth onwards

Surprisingly little academic theory centres on the conundrum of historiography emanating from commercial art dealers who serve in a dual capacity as experts in their field. Analysis of the implications of dealer-derived literature in expanding and defining the field of knowledge becomes increasingly exigent where research materials are informed principally by connoisseurship and collecting activity. This is particularly the case where - as in the case of Chinese furniture - the field itself has not been the focus of academic attention. As Stewart and Anderson have noted, by itself the term “connoisseurship” may invite a range of interpretations and its definition in a literal sense is not definitive of a singular activity but of a spectrum of engagements. The term is used here to describe activity by both collectors and non-academic commercial proponents such as art dealers trained through experience of the object.³⁰⁴

The epistemological implications of non-academic literature relating to art fields formed predominantly by connoisseurship rather than scholarly analysis has not been well addressed in academia and may theoretically create asymmetry in even the most well studied of art historical canons. In this context, dealer literature occupies an ambiguous space in the wider art historical literary canon. This is particularly the case in fields defined by connoisseurship such as Chinese furniture which is almost entirely dependent on the assimilation of objects by the same actors responsible for its historiography. Writing in “Connoisseurship as Practice,” David Ebitz has pointed out the essential contribution that connoisseurs have made to the discovery of knowledge, attribution and classification of art works, noting that “connoisseurship is the craft of art history” albeit one “tainted in the eyes of a new generation of art historians ... by its collaboration in the art market.”³⁰⁵ Art dealers and connoisseurs acquire significant practical experience in handling art works in the fields in which they develop specialist knowledge; conversely a pervasive association with

³⁰³ Wu Tung. “From Imported ‘Nomadic Seat’ to Chinese Folding Armchair.” *Boston Museum Bulletin* 71, no. 363 (1973): 36-48. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4171580>. Accessed 12.05.2020.

³⁰⁴ Peter Stewart and Christina M. Anderson. 2023. *Connoisseurship*. New York, NY: Oxford University. doi:10.1093/oso/9780190923587.001.0001. 1, 7. Accessed 15.02.2021.

³⁰⁵ David Ebitz, “Connoisseurship as Practice.” *Artibus et Historiae* 9, no. 18 (1988): 207-12. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1483344>. Accessed 21.03.2021.

commercial interests and potential deficit of academic impartiality may present a conflict in connoisseur-derived historiography. Irrespective of any tangible evidence of partiality, the implicit potential for pecuniary bias in connoisseur literature effects its reception even at a subliminal level.

Analysis of the contribution of connoisseurship to the art historical discipline is relatively extensive and well established; however, commentary addressing the symbiotic relationship between dealer and critic or theoretician is principally framed around the establishment of the modern art market in the nineteenth century the making of art markets against which collecting practices are shaped and notions of value established. For example, Cynthia White and Harrison White's commentary addresses the end of the government-controlled Salon system of selecting and exhibiting artwork in France in the 1870s and the establishment of a modern commercial system of propagating, disseminating and consuming art. The basis for the mechanism underpinning this new functioning of the art establishment was termed "the dealer-critic system" in contrast to the preceding Academic system, highlighting the dual and intertwined roles of the dealer and critic as promotor and adjudicator of artistic value. As James S. Ackerman has stated, "...if the critic's job is to communicate the qualities of works of art, and the historian's is to understand the arts of the past, then neither can perform properly without the accomplishments of both."³⁰⁶

White and White have remarked on the perceived role of the critic as disinterested observer as an intrinsic part of the educative and discriminatory mechanism required for the functioning of the modern art market, whereas an inherent a feature of dealer literature is the blending of roles between detached critic and distributor of art objects. Studies on the critical role of art dealers in creating art markets for particular categories of object typically focus on the involvement of the dealer in the *production* of art, for example in the inception of the modern art market in France and the UK as exemplified in White and Ackerman or otherwise on the contemporary art market (Galenson).³⁰⁷ Rojas and De La Torre, for example note that in the contemporary art market, "Art dealing [as] a practice... is an extension of other art centric practices such as art education, collection, museum practice, and studio work."³⁰⁸

³⁰⁶ James S. Ackerman. "Art History and the Problems of Criticism." *Daedalus* 89, no. 1 (1960): 253-63. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20026565>. 253.

³⁰⁷ David Galenson and Robert Jensen. "Careers and Canvases: The Rise of the Market for Modern Art in the Nineteenth Century" *National Bureau of Economic Research* Paper 9123 (2002). Accessed 23 May 2022. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w9123>. 84, 148-160.

³⁰⁸ Fabio Rojas & David De La Torre, 2023. "Art dealers as competitors and community builders: Understanding the overlapping social logics of the contemporary art world." *Sociology Compass*, e13125. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.13125>

Studies and observations on the implicit contradictions in dealer-derived historiography are few, if they exist at all.³⁰⁹

Whilst the commutation of commercial and private interest implies discretion in the selection of examples of art works illustrated and described in art dealer literature, in the case of Chinese furniture, the historiographical vacuum resulting from a paucity of academic research has been necessarily mitigated by dealer-derived literature in which the dealer assumes the role of both art historian by proxy and critic. Writing of the Dutch art market in the 17th Century, Anderson and Stewart note that “in the relative absence of institutional contexts for the appraisal or validation of works of art, the connoisseur was somewhere between professional and amateur” typically concerned with object details such as provenance and origination, determinative of monetary value assessed through experiential relativity.³¹⁰ The same circumstances may be deemed to apply to studies of Chinese furniture in the twentieth century.

In her study of London-based fine art dealers, Ann Helmreich has observed “that art history, art criticism, and art dealing were nebulous and overlapping fields of knowledge” to which art dealers responded by leveraging the printed medium to distance themselves from less desirable aspects of the art “trade” though the production of catalogues based on the catalogue raisonné format.³¹¹ The activities of Henri Vetch at the *La Librairie Française* (The French Bookstore) at the Hotel Wagon Lits in Beijing exemplify both this global circulation of a globalised printed discourse on art, and pursuant to Baetens and Dries’ argument, the determination of national identity within an internationalised space.³¹² Helmrich proposes that print production was central to both the development of art history and to the commercialisation of the art market for both audience and the construction of the image of the “dealer-as-expert” in his field.³¹³ As this thesis substantiates, the inception and availability of printed historiographical matter has been a catalytic factor in the formation of an aesthetic ‘field’ of Chinese furniture thus elevating the object from functional quotidian artefact to art form.

³⁰⁹ Harrison C. White and Cynthia A. White. 1993. *Canvases and Careers: Institutional Change in the French Painting World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

³¹⁰ Anderson and Stewart, *Connoisseurship*, 4.

³¹¹ Anne Helmreich. “David Croal Thomson: The Professionalization of Art Dealing in an Expanding Field.” *Getty Research Journal*, no. 5 (2013): 89-100. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41825349>. 92-93.

³¹² Jan Dirk Baetens and Dries Lyna, “The Education of the Art Market: National Schools and International Trade in the ‘Long’ Nineteenth Century,” in *Art Crossing Borders: The Internationalisation of the Art Market in the Age of Nation States, 1750-1914*, ed. Jan Dirk Baetens and Dries Lyna, 6:15-63 (Brill, 2019). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctvrk3fq.7>.

³¹³ Helmreich, “David Croal Thompson,” 92.

The writing of Gustav Ecke, George Kates and C.P. Fitzgerald attests to the fact that the pioneer writers on Chinese furniture were essentially neophyte enthusiasts with a personal curiosity and scholarly appreciation for both the culture and history of China and an intuitive recognition of the relevance of the elemental forms and spare outlines of the classical Chinese furniture styles to a modern Western aesthetic. Written between 1944 and 1966, the works of these early collectors shared an empirical and documentary approach to their subject matter with varying levels of reference to the sparse evidential primary research material available to them at the time. Although George and Beatrice Kates had identified the commercial potential for distributing Chinese furniture to a Western audience, a combination of political upheaval and lack of available capital prevented them from acquiring and exporting extant pieces in sufficient quantities to form a viable business enterprise. Letters between Kates and his sister describe their intention to collaborate in the export of Chinese hardwood furniture to New York where Beatrice worked as an interior designer; Chinese political affairs prevented them from executing on this plan.³¹⁴

Robert and William Drummond, also former Beijing residents, were more successful in their commercial operations having shipped a substantial quantity of high quality hardwood furniture to New York when they departed from Beijing. This led to the establishment of *Dynasty Furniture* a business specialising in the manufacture and distribution of reproduction hardwood furniture in the classical austere ‘Ming’ style which was produced in the company’s workshop in Kowloon, Hong Kong. During the 1960s and 70s, with China’s borders closed to the West, a small number of New York-based art dealers began to exploit opportunities to acquire, promote and profit from Chinese artworks across all categories and media. Working under the guidance of his more established mentor, the Asian art dealer Alice Boney (1901-1988), Robert Hatfield Ellsworth became a pivotal figure in the rise to value and esteem of Chinese classical furniture.³¹⁵ Through a combination of activities that spanned dealing, exhibiting, research and writing, over the course of the second half of the twentieth century Ellsworth became a key instigator for the promotion of Chinese furniture and its increase in prominence and financial value.

Ellsworth made a prodigious start to his career in the art market in 1946 aged seventeen through his role with the New York porcelain dealers, Stoner and Evans, as Frank Stoner’s assistant where he was involved with liquidation of the European porcelain and

³¹⁴ Letter from Beatrice Kates to George Kates dated March 5 1946. George Norbert Kates Papers. AAA. Smithsonian Institute.

³¹⁵ Alice Boney dealt in Asian art from China, Japan and India and opened the first Chinese fine art gallery in New York in the mid-1920s. <https://asia.si.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Boney-Alice.pdf> accessed 21/02/2020.

painting collections of noted German collector Otto Blohm (1870-1944).³¹⁶ Stoner and Evans' gallery was situated in the same building as the New York Branch of European art dealer Frank Partridge and Sons in New York. Whilst these early experiences and associations primarily exposed Ellsworth to European art, it may not be inconsequential that Partridge specialised in fine European furniture which he displayed alongside Chinese art for sale, combining appreciation of Asian art as well as the value of furniture as an art form and its commercial potential. A meeting in 1947 with the (then) Hong Kong based art dealer Alice Boney on the advice of Stoner for the purpose of authenticating a Chinese pot Ellsworth had speculatively purchased in a Brooklyn thrift shop was catalytic to Ellsworth's orientation towards Chinese art. Boney, who had been dealing in Chinese art since the 1920s and was considered the "Doyenne of Oriental Art Dealers" identified the piece as Ming.³¹⁷ Impressed by Ellsworth's acuity, Boney styled herself as Ellsworth's mentor and instructor in the trade.³¹⁸ She later introduced him to Langdon Warner at Harvard and Wang Fangyu 王方宇 (1913-1997), Professor of Chinese at Yale, where her recommendation was sufficient for Ellsworth to be offered places to study Chinese at both establishments (though not concurrently) despite his lack of high school qualifications.³¹⁹ Having begun by selling Chinese and Japanese paintings in the 1920s, Boney had also started to acquire Chinese furniture from the residents of Beijing who had returned to America in the 1930 and 40s, notably the Drummond brothers.³²⁰

Ellsworth's principal contribution to the advancement of historiography of classical furniture was *Chinese Furniture: Hardwood Examples*, published in 1970 and followed by two later books focused on furniture items in specific individual collections which he had helped to build in a commercial and advisory function. Two subsequent books, *Chinese Furniture: One Hundred Examples from the Mimi and Raymond Hung*, and *Chinese Hardwood Furniture in Hawaiian Collections*, were both published in 1996.³²¹ In addition to his texts on Chinese furniture, Ellsworth published books on later Chinese painting,

³¹⁶ See (Unattributed) "Blohm's Porcelain Goes on Exhibition", *The New York Times*, January 15, 1948, 20. Accessed 24.09.2023. <https://nyti.ms/3TJKjP9>.

³¹⁷ Anita Christy, "Alice Boney: The Doyenne of Oriental Art Dealers," *Orientations* 19, no. 12 (December 1988), 54-59.

³¹⁸ Ellsworth, *Discovery*, 26-27. Ellsworth's activity during this period is further described in the following quote in "'During the China war relief of the 40's ... people donated their objects to relief thrift shops. I bought them and sold to antiques dealers.'" Margaret Loke, "China's Modern Masters". *New York Times*, 1988. February 7, 1988, Section 6, 470. Accessed 23 August 2020. <https://nyti.ms/3zGUVrb>.

³¹⁹ Ellsworth, *Discovery*, 25-44.

³²⁰ A *huanghuali* daybed belonging to Boney and later bequeathed to Ellsworth was acquired from Robert and William Drummond in 1949. Robert Hatfield Ellsworth. 1966. *Chinese Furniture: One Hundred Examples from the Mimi and Raymond Hung Collection*. New York. Privately published. 96-97.

³²¹ Robert Hatfield Ellsworth, Howard A. Link and Honolulu Academy of Arts. 1982. *Chinese Hardwood Furniture in Hawaiian Collections: [Exhibition]*. Honolulu: Honolulu Academy of Arts.

calligraphy and stone furniture, reflecting the diversification of his business interests in the antique trade. This also evinces the relative paucity of available pieces of Chinese furniture at the time: in other words, Ellsworth's distinctive financial and commercial success could not have been achieved by dealing solely in Chinese furniture. *Chinese Furniture, Hardwood Examples*, was presented as object-based connoisseur study of the preceding literature on the subject which anticipated the changing perception in the West of Chinese furniture as a field worthy of both collection and study. Ellsworth noted that the Chinese furniture collecting activity of the early "pioneers" in Beijing was instrumental to the subsequent formation of significant collections of Chinese furniture in the major public museums in Cleveland, Kansas City, Philadelphia and the Honolulu Academy of the Arts, stating "... this important field of the Chinese decorative arts... must be treated in the same fashion that specialists in European decorative arts have approached its Western counterpart."³²² An evaluation of *Chinese Furniture: Hardwood Examples* evidences the maturation of the broader sociocultural context into which Chinese furniture was received in the West in this postmodern period.³²³

Whereas earlier writers such as Stone, Fitzgerald and Jean Gordon Lee had considered the origin of the chair in China and etymology of the term 'hu chuang', Ellsworth began his 1970 monograph with an analysis of one the earliest known items of Chinese furniture: the full size frame of a bed, discovered during the excavation of a Zhu 楚 family tomb from the Warring States period (c. 475-221 BCE) in 1957 at Zhangtaiguan 長台关, in Xinyang 信陽 Henan province.³²⁴ (Figure 2.19) Regarding the use of the adjective *hu* to describe the folding chair (胡床, *hu chuang*), Ellsworth noted that throughout history, the population of China remained fluid as China's shifting borders changed in line with successive dynasties and that as a result two thirds of the Chinese population including all nomadic tribes were considered to be foreign.³²⁵ Ellsworth described the bed in question as constructed in metal, "probably iron.... lacquered, as is the superstructure of the bed". Although Ellsworth had spent time travelling in Asia both independently and with Boney, he had presumably not inspected the bed himself because he referenced an illustrated report

³²² Ellsworth, *Chinese Furniture: Hardwood Examples*, 11.

³²³ Dates for postmodernism in art and architecture vary between sources; in general postmodernism is cited as a rejection of modernist doctrine occurring from the late 1960s. See Frederic Jameson in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

³²⁴ Incorrectly described as a tester bed. Ellsworth, *Chinese Furniture: Hardwood Examples*, 12.

³²⁵ Ellsworth, *Chinese Furniture: Hardwood Examples*, 14.

from the excavation, showing the bed with borders “carved in geometric, key fret design and the legs double scrolled and carved in deep relief.”³²⁶ (Figure 2.20 and 2.21)

There is clear evidence for the early development of the bed in China, which renders questionable the fascination among early Western writers on Chinese furniture for locating an alien nexus of import for the chair and its attendant impact on modes of living. Handler also notes that the bed was the most significant item of furniture in traditional Chinese houses, citing the beds excavated at Xinyang as evidence of a long developed tradition of design from which the hardwood Ming and Qing designs that were later sought after by collectors emerged.³²⁷ Handler’s article “The Chinese Bed” which expanded on these ideas, was published in the journal *Orientalism* in 1984.³²⁸ Ellsworth provided as an appendix the translation of an article by the scholar Zhu Jiajin, first published in Chinese in 1959 in *Wenwu*.³²⁹ This emphasised the earlier development of beds and sleeping platforms over that of the frame chair through reference to archival evidence dated to the Southern and Northern Wei dynasties (420-589 CE).³³⁰

The article notes that beds were used for both sitting and sleeping. Early origin for the bed in China is also cited by Donald Holzman in his critique of C.P. Fitzgerald’s *Barbarian Beds*. Holzman references literary evidence of the use of the couch (榻, *ta*), sometimes described as a daybed, which he asserts entered into use in China among the political classes concurrently with the *hu chuang*.³³¹ Although (as Ellsworth noted) the height of chairs impacted requirements for the relative height of table furniture whether at kang level or seated upright with legs at a ninety degrees, the preoccupation of early Western writers on Chinese furniture with establishing an alien origin for the chair raises questions about distinctions in cultural symbology that exist between the bed and the chair.³³² It is clear that the use of the bed as the principal platform and support for the elevation of daily activities was firmly established in China from the earliest times.

John Kieschnick similarly provides evidence, albeit from historical Qing reconstructions, which asserts that beds were used in ancient China though primarily for

³²⁶ Ellsworth, *Chinese Furniture: Hardwood Examples*, 12. See Fig. 5 in Elinor Pearlstein. “Pictorial Stones from Chinese Tombs.” *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 71, no. 9 (1984): 302-31. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25159885>.

³²⁷ See Handler, *Austere Luminosity of Chinese Furniture*, 139.

³²⁸ Sarah Handler, “The Chinese Bed”. *Orientalism - Chinese Furniture 1984- 1999*, (Orientations Magazine Ltd., Hong Kong, 1999). 4-16

³²⁹ Ellsworth, *Chinese Furniture: Hardwood Examples*, Appendix A.

³³⁰ Ellsworth, *Chinese Furniture: Hardwood Examples*, Appendix A.

³³¹ Donald Holzman, “À Propos de l’origine de La Chaise En Chine.” *T’oung Pao* 53, no. 4/5 (1967): 279-92. 285. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4527690>. Accessed 23.09.2023.

³³² Ellsworth, *Chinese Furniture: Hardwood Examples*, 13.

raised sitting rather than sleeping. The use of beds in the bedroom for sleeping was exceptional and primarily reserved for the sick and infirm.³³³ Whilst it is clear that the use of mats for sitting was considered correct in early China, furniture for seating, whether with back rests or raised couches existed within this context. As this mode of daily living does not exist in the West, a focus on the use of the chair in particular may be indicative of a desire to identify equivalence and signify moralistic acculturation. The chair is associated with upright bearing and posture and when partnered with the table or desk exemplifies productivity, industriousness and intellectual study. The bed, by contrast, is suggestive of dissoluteness and dissipation, inducing images of sloth, indolence or sensuality. In addition, Chinese beds differed from Western beds in size and perceived level of comfort, and from a collecting standpoint translate less easily into items for contemporary daily use. It may be considered whether furniture for reclining, rather than sitting, remained even in the mid-twentieth century more closely associated in the Western consciousness with lingering connotations of hedonism typified by images of opium dens depicted in moralising Victorian engravings. (Figure 2.22)

By the first half of the twentieth century from which the foundational historiography of Chinese furniture originated, the idea that the development of the chair, and its associations with an elevated mode of living might have occurred organically within China was generally not a focus for consideration.³³⁴ Whilst this seems to ignore the Chinese habit of raising items off the floor for practical reasons (objects such as the cauldron (鼎, *ding*) were from the earliest times in Chinese history set higher on legs or raised on plinths) the search for an extrinsic nexus for the development of the chair is consistent with Western archaeological hypotheses of the period. The Duanfang bronze table featured in Ecke, discussed earlier in this chapter and now in the collection of the MMA (Figure 1.11a) illustrates that table furniture objects dating from early dynasties were simplified structures used to elevate ceremonial objects. It therefore seems clear that from ancient times the raised platform or dais had a semiotic purpose which transcended functional utility driven by climactic environmental conditions in China as evidenced by the widespread use of *kang* furniture across all sections of society. Literary evidence attests to the fact that Chinese social

³³³ John Kieschnick, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 224.

³³⁴ The exception to this as noted previously in this thesis is in C.P. Fitzgerald's *Barbarian Beds* which determined that the fixed frame chair had arisen as an organic but later development within China.

custom applied the basic vocabulary and symbolism conveyed by differing levels of elevation and that the function of furniture was esoteric as well as utilitarian.³³⁵

In the 1970s the collecting of Chinese furniture remained relatively nascent and began to acquire greater momentum only in the succeeding decade. In this respect, Ellsworth's *Chinese Furniture: Hardwood Examples* expanded the scope and latitude of the literature, concurrently epitomising and contributing to a heightening focus on Chinese Ming and Qing hardwood furniture and advancing the historiography of Chinese furniture. Ellsworth covered a broad range of related themes including design and construction techniques; the use of hardwood and better indigenous softwood materials; and joinery and metalwork, with greater proficiency and detail than earlier authors. The breadth of this study, whilst focusing on Ming and Qing Chinese furniture in the classical style, presented a significant enhancement to the literature. Although Ellsworth was not an academically trained scholar of Chinese art, his success both as a dealer, promoter and writer stemmed from a belletristic appreciation and experiential knowledge of the object conjoined with a persuasive ability to galvanise and leverage the technical competencies of qualified individuals with a deeper formalistic knowledge of Asian culture and art than he himself possessed. Alexandra Monroe, former curator of the Japan Society Gallery in New York, has observed that Ellsworth "charmed the Shanghai literatus into conducting research on his own arcane pursuits."³³⁶ Wang Fangyu and others became Ellsworth's unofficial advisors on matters of literary and cultural research which exceeded his own expertise and language ability. Ellsworth's absence of scholarly grounding prioritised a collecting approach and methodology which favoured the selection of singular objects displaying unique characteristics, such as the set of four *zitan* armchairs engraved with colophons described in great detail in *Chinese Furniture: Hardwood Examples* (discussed in detail below). An appreciation for Chinese culture and sociopolitical agnosticism enabled Ellsworth to initiate a review of Chinese furniture from a perspective that neither reflected implicit colonialist doctrines or other implicitly partisan-based judgements. Ellsworth's approach placed the object at the centre of an aesthetic and artistic discourse which apotheosised its civilisation of origin.

As Samuel-Mbaekwe has elucidated, the mid twentieth century in which much of the earlier literature on Chinese furniture was written represented the apex of the pervasive

³³⁵ Books from early dynasties describe the social use of furniture with emphasis the material used in table construction and their arrangement in line with hierarchical seating arrangements.

³³⁶ Alexandra Munroe, "Robert Hatfield Ellsworth (1929-2014): The Sensuous Immortal," *ArtAsiaPacific Magazine* 92 (2015): 120-127. Accessed 18 March 2020. <http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/92/TheSensuousImmortal>.

dogma of European colonialism, the process of which governed interactions, attitudes and discourse between both coloniser and colonised.³³⁷ *Chinese Furniture: Hardwood Examples* inculcated a more culturally aware perspective on the heritage of Chinese furniture and its appreciation and collecting in China than that which had preceded it. Two specific examples from the book attest to this. At the start of the book, some fifteen pages are dedicated to the analysis of a set of four Ming dynasty *zitan* 紫檀 *nan guan mao yi* 南官帽椅 (official's hat armchairs), now in the collection of the MMA.³³⁸ Constructed as a set during the sixteenth century, according to Ellsworth (though later disputed by Wang Shixiang) the four chairs (Figure 2.23) were separated during subsequent centuries until they were determinedly reunited during the reign of Qing Emperor Tongzhi (r.1861-1875) by Wu Yun 吳雲 (1811-1883), a scholar-literati and noted collector of calligraphy and painting from Anhui province living in Huzhou, Zhejiang. Equating Wu's tenacious collecting drive in seeking out the four dispersed chairs with the literati reverence for scholars' items from past dynasties, Ellsworth quoted Ecke in *Chinese Domestic Furniture*: "Even a hundred years ago, Ming tradition lingered on in Soochow families." The four chairs themselves are inscribed with *tiba* 题跋 (inscriptions and colophons) and *jianshang zhang* 鉴赏章 (collector's seals) by well-known Ming dynasty scholars. To these original calligraphic inscriptions, which Ellsworth states were inscribed during the Ming dynasty presumably around the time that the chairs were constructed, Wu Yun added his own inscriptions describing the circumstances of their discovery and collection.

Illustrations of both sets of Ming and Qing dynasty inscriptions and seals demonstrate a high level of scholarly expression and accuracy of execution in the quality of the carvings, seemingly retaining the full artistic merit of the original calligraphic works on paper from which they derived. In a field of objects which are notoriously difficult to date or to associate with individual craftsmen or owners, Ellsworth cites these examples as evidence of reliably dated furniture connected with known collectors and actors in possession of cultural capital and standing in Chinese art history. In addition to dated furniture examples, the source material in Ellsworth's book offered in evidence for the wider dating of furniture development linked to changes in lifestyle factors included four carved wooden Yuan dynasty pillars (Figure 2.24) incised with images which he claimed supported the hypothesis that seated furniture took hold in Chinese culture during the Song dynasty, in

³³⁷ Iheanyi J. Samuel-Mbaekwe. "Colonialism and Social Structure." *Transafrican Journal of History* 15 (1986): 81-95. 82. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24328608>. Accessed 04.03.2022.

³³⁸ 'Officials hat' is a twentieth century term used to describe high backed armchairs, with a yoked or protruding crestrail, resembling the traditional headwear worn by scholar officials.

concurrence with Stone and Fitzgerald's earlier writing on the topic. The four pillars, which depicted Chinese Buddhist scenes, substantiated the suggestion that higher chair level seating and the adjustment of associated items of furniture needed to facilitate this higher level of functioning, such as tea tables and incense tables, were firmly established by the end of the Song.³³⁹

A change in political relations between America and China took place in the early 1970s with President Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972 resulting in the Shanghai Communiqué and precipitating a newly harmonious era. As a contemporary article in the New York Times suggested, reinvigorated relations between China and the US transcended politics and embraced cultural exchange.³⁴⁰ Until this point, the narrative historiography of Chinese furniture as documented by Western writers largely subscribed to an imperialistic and expropriative representation which implicitly and unambiguously presupposed that Chinese furniture was not valued within China and had been salvaged from destruction by Western collectors. Statements such as the following excerpt from Kates in *Chinese Household Furniture*, exemplified this at length: "The wear and tear of Asia, where teeming populations... strip like locusts anything left unprotected... Credit for a part of [the] work of reconstruction is ... due to the Westerner whose curiosity and persistence have bought tangible results."³⁴¹ The inclusion of objects which had evidentially been prized by Chinese collectors, such as the four inscribed *zitan* chairs in Ellsworth's book purportedly reunited by Wu Yun, served to contravene this perspective.

Further evidence for greater proximity to Chinese culture evidenced in *Chinese Furniture: Hardwood Examples* is evidenced in Ellsworth's acknowledgement of an indigenous connection between textiles and furniture in domestic and ceremonial settings. Previously in the written literature, despite plentiful evidence for the association between textiles and furniture, Western authors had eulogised only the visual and aesthetic qualities of fine quality hardwoods as they appear without the application of textile coverings which would have been customary practice in China. This method of presentation reflected modern Western rather than Chinese tastes and did not reflect the manner of display within autochthonous Chinese domestic settings. Tables and chairs were traditionally hung with elaborate, richly coloured embroidered or brocade silk for at least a part of the year, for reasons of comfort, status and celebration, concealing the finely grained wooden surfaces to

³³⁹ Ellsworth, *Chinese Furniture: Hardwood Examples*, 16-21.

³⁴⁰ Dan Carlinsky and Edwin Goodgold, "Nixon's Trip to China - What Does It Mean to the Arts?" *The New York Times*, December 26, 1971, 111. <https://nyti.ms/3zsEGy3>. Accessed August 23, 2020.

³⁴¹ Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*, 7-8 and 113.

which modern Western collectors were particularly drawn. The use of such coverings had both a practical function and a social implication, with the brightest and most elaborate being reserved for senior officials and high-ranking guests.

In *Chinese Furniture: Hardwood Examples*, Ellsworth described and illustrated the use of textile coverings for hardwood furniture, a common practice in China especially during the cold winter months. (Figure 2.25) This custom was essentially unacknowledged by earlier writers on the topic, despite an established but separate practice of collecting Chinese silks and textiles which does not appear to have been often drawn together with the practice of displaying collected furniture. There are multiple references to the purchase and acquisition of Chinese textiles among Laurence Sickman's archival papers in the NAMA in Kansas City during and subsequent to his time in Beijing. For example, Sickman's accounting ledger records the purchase on 11 July 1932 of "Brocade - set of two chair covers, one table cover dragon pattern, 17-18th Century - 194.00."³⁴² The same source documents the shipment from Peking Crafts on May 13, 1932 of "4 Wooden Lacquer Chairs; 4 Cushions for the Same."³⁴³ As Sickman's acquisitions on behalf of the Nelson Art Gallery demonstrate, the omission of textiles from earlier historiographical works does not indicate that furniture coverings were unavailable or unknown to western authors and collectors. An auction catalogue of artefacts from the Imperial Palace in Beijing published by the American Art Galleries at Madison Square, New York in 1917 attests to the circulation of embroidered silk and brocades furniture coverings in America. The catalogue contained an extensive section titled "Chinese Embroidered Table Covers and Imperial Textiles" featuring arm rests as well as table covers and numerous pieces of lacquered palace furniture.³⁴⁴

Ellsworth included several illustrations showing Ming or Qing chairs with contemporary Chinese coverings in silk and velvet, noting the customary use of textile chair coverings in China from the inception of their use.³⁴⁵ The extent of this practice of covering furniture, and chairs in particular is documented by a wealth of visual and literary evidence. The Qing dynasty imperial encyclopaedia, *Gujin tushu jicheng* 古今图书集成 (A Complete

³⁴² Laurence Sickman Account book, 1932-35. Laurence Sickman Papers, MS001 III Nelson Gallery. Box 10f; File 04.

³⁴³ Laurence Sickman Papers. Account book 1932-35.

³⁴⁴ See *Oriental Art Treasures from the Chinese Imperial Palace*, 1917, which contains sections on both "Teakwood Furniture" and "Chinese Embroidered Table Covers and Imperial Textiles" (unpaginated). Subtitled "Illustrated catalogue of the furniture and embellishments from the imperial palace, Pekin: exquisitely wrought gold ornaments from the ceremonial crowns of the former emperor and empress of China and numerous other objects of antiquity and distinctive artistic excellence recently acquired by the firm of Messrs. Yamanaka & Company". Published by the American Art Association: New York. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/coo1.ark:/13960/t6931d31f> Accessed 09.03.2021.

³⁴⁵ Ellsworth, *Chinese Furniture: Hardwood Examples*, 86.

Collection of Books from Ancient to Modern) compiled during the reign of Emperor Kangxi (r. 1661-1722) and amended during the reign of the Yongzheng Emperor 雍正 (r. 1722-1735), includes a section on furniture which contains a number of references derived from earlier literature sources related to social practices and sumptuary rules governing the use of furniture coverings, both for comfort in China's harsh continental climate and to soften the impact of hardwood surfaces; and as a signifier of rank and status.³⁴⁶

Chinese Furniture: Hardwood Examples featured over 160 specimen pieces of furniture arranged categorically by type across beds, tables, chairs, daybeds, stools, cupboards, desks, chests and stands. Ellsworth has been critiqued for his attempts to provide broad dating for some pieces without providing verifiable justification of rationale for his attributions. Sarah Handler has noted "Ellsworth is prone to statements such as "Daybed 37 comes from the 16th century, whereas Daybed 38 was undoubtedly made a hundred years later; this is indicated by the recessed, separate-member panel."³⁴⁷ In actuality, as noted previously in this chapter, consistency of both construction and style over centuries renders both statements difficult to justify, regardless of Ellsworth's attempt to cite constructional differences between various pieces. Other pieces are simply described as "early sixteenth century," with no attempt at articulating a logic for analysis of dating.³⁴⁸ A chapter entitled "Ming Evidences for the Dating of Chinese Furniture" acknowledged the difficulties of dating and authenticating Chinese furniture, stating that "ornate and severe styles were produced side by side at the same time... and the basic styles... did not change radically."³⁴⁹ This section draws on various furniture examples, including the inscribed *zitan* chairs referred to in preceding paragraphs; though Ellsworth failed to reach any general conclusions or to establish specific criteria for use in the dating of furniture which could be applied by practitioners.

Of the examples included in the book, the majority (62.5%) were constructed in *huanghuali*, which was by this time established in the Western literature as the most

³⁴⁶ The *Qinding gujin tushu jicheng* 钦定古今图书集成 (Imperially Endorsed Complete Collection of Writings and Illustrations of Past and Present) was compiled under the direction of Chen Menglei 陈梦雷 (1650-1741) and completed in 1723 by Jiang Tingxi 蒋廷锡 (1669-1732) and first published in 1725. *Jingji bian* 经济编 (Historical writings on Political Economy), *Kaogong dian* 考工典 (Section of artificers), *Di erbai shisi juan mulu* 第二百十四卷目录 (The list of Chapter 214); which contains historical records and information on different categories of furniture providing considerable insight into the cultural and symbolic significance of furniture and social customs surrounding its use. This information cited from the 1934 edition published by Zhonghua shuju press 中华书局 harcopy reprinted in 1985.

³⁴⁷ Sarah Handler. 2005. *Ming Furniture in the Light of Chinese Architecture*. Berkeley, Calif., Enfield: Ten Speed Press. 91.

³⁴⁸ For example, see item 51 in Ellsworth, *Ming and Qing Furniture: Hardwood Examples*, 249.

³⁴⁹ Ellsworth, *Ming and Qing Furniture: Hardwood Examples*, 23.

desirable of fine Chinese hardwoods. Although the book displays a bias towards the inclusion of hardwood pieces (comprising some 87%), a range of materials were represented in the book including *zitan*, *jichimu* and *hongmu* as well as bamboo and lacquered softwoods. The book summarised the different genera associated with the principal woods referenced by Ecke, Kates and Jean Gordon Lee, emphasizing by implication the lack of uncertainty and scientific research related to the identification of the most important wood types.³⁵⁰ The Chinese characters and translation given for *huanghuali* are those for the homophone for “yellow flowering pear,” emphasizing the continued reliance on ideas and concepts established by Ecke and Kates twenty-five years earlier. Similarly, Ellsworth’s assertion that the finest woods used to make early Chinese furniture were imported from outside China demonstrates a lack of familiarity with relevant historical Chinese texts which clearly describes procurement of *huanghuali* from Hainan Island.³⁵¹

Ellsworth stated that the six woods “most often encountered in Ming and Ch’ing hardwood furniture” were *huanghuali*, *hongmu*, *lao huali*, *zitan*, *jichimu* and *huamu*; thus expanding the circle of ‘superior’ hardwoods.³⁵² However, the declaration that Chinese names refer to the appearance of the woods and offer no assistance in identifying the specific genus of the wood is only partially correct. As referenced previously in this thesis, alternative sources have proposed species and even geographical nexus for the botanical origin for *huanghuali*. Similarly, Ellsworth claimed that Chinese names such as *huanghuali* and *jichimu* referred not to individual species of tree, but rather to groups of woods of similar appearance. He therefore asserted that botanical tests to identify “species or genera of a group of woods marketed under one Chinese name seems futile,” as this would require identification of a live specimen tree, which Ellsworth inaccurately stated were extinct.³⁵³ At least one specimen of the *huanghuali* tree (*Dalbergia odorifera* T Chen) remains extant at the South China Botanical Garden of Chinese Academy of Sciences 华南植物园 in Guangzhou and is the subject of ongoing scientific research and propagation.³⁵⁴ His

³⁵⁰ Jean Gordon Lee. 1963. “Chinese Furniture Collection.” *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 58 (276): 41-80. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3795082>. Accessed 21.11.2020. At 49, Lee set out a wide list of woods used in Chinese cabinet woods; in actuality the furniture items in the Philadelphia Museum collection were principally constructed in *huanghuali*.

³⁵¹ Ellsworth, *Ming and Qing Furniture: Hardwood Examples*, 44. Per Michalk, Hainan Island was acceded to Chinese rule in 110 BCE. D.L. Michalk, “Hainan Island: A Brief Historical Sketch,” *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 26 (1986): 115-143. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23887126>.

³⁵² Ellsworth, *Ming and Qing Furniture: Hardwood Examples*, 24.

³⁵³ Ellsworth, *Chinese Furniture: Hardwood Examples*, 25.

³⁵⁴ Fung, “Huanghuali,” 43. See also Huang Shao-Fu, Zhao Ye-Fen, and Chen Zhong-Yi, “The Karyotype Analysis of *Dalbergia odorifera* T. Chen,” *Journal of Systematics and Evolution* 22, no. 3 (June 18, 1984): 250-251. <https://www.jse.ac.cn/EN/abstract/abstract18383.shtml>. Accessed 21 July 2022.

proposed solution to the lack of clear delineation between Chinese names wood names and specific species which appears convenient from the perspective of an art dealer, was to forgo the determination of species of hardwood and to refer instead to “broader Linnaean terms....giving a Western classification to Chinese names for a group of woods.”³⁵⁵ This hypothesis has become the adopted standard in Chinese furniture dealing practices among art dealers but fails to take into account relevant historical Chinese literature providing insight into the species and origin of some of the key hardwoods, notably *huanghuali*.

The list of collections from which the pieces featured in the book provides insight into the identities of key American collectors of Chinese furniture by the 1970s. Around a third of the 161 items represented in the book derived from Ellsworth’s own collection, of which many were cited with notable provenance including from the familial collection of the Japanese industrialist Baron Denzaburo Fujita (1841-1912), George Kates and C.P. Fitzgerald. Provenance of the remaining items include James Biddle (1929-2005), former curator at the MMA; the Asian art dealer and modern art collector Frederick Mueller, (1936-1989); Alice Boney, who owned eleven pieces; Gustave Ecke in Honolulu (seven pieces); philanthropist Paul Mellon (1907-1999); Sherman Lee (1918-2008), Director of the Cleveland Museum of Art;⁶ and Laurence Sickman. Major American art institutions with significant collections of Chinese furniture were represented: The MMA; the Cleveland Museum in Ohio; the Philadelphia Museum of Art; and the NAMA in Kansas City.

The final contribution of significance to the historiography on Chinese furniture to be published during the 1970s was similarly authored by a commercial expert. Michel Beurdeley (1911-2012) was a commercial expert and generalist authority in Asian art who published a number of books across a broad spectrum of fields including Qing imperial paintings, bronzeware and porcelain.³⁵⁶ In the preface to *Chinese Furniture*, published in 1979, Beurdeley laid out as the book’s rationale the lack of focus from authors on the topic other than Ellsworth and Ecke whose writing had solely addressed hardwood furniture, eschewing lacquer and other materials.³⁵⁷ In apparent redress, the book presents as a survey of the history and development in Chinese furniture from antiquity to the Qing dynasty with the objective a comprehensive conspectus of furniture as full a variety of styles and materials as possible.

³⁵⁵ Ellsworth, *Chinese Furniture: Hardwood Examples*, 25.

³⁵⁶ See, for example, Michel Beurdeley. 1971. *Giuseppe Castiglione: A Jesuit Painter at the Court of the Chinese Emperors*. Rutland, Vt: Tuttle.

³⁵⁷ Beurdeley, *Chinese Furniture*, 8.

Beurdeley was born into a prestigious family of Parisian cabinet makers whose ornate and highly sculptural work was more aligned to the furniture in the early books by Dupont and Roche and his writing traversed the divide between scholarship which addressed hardwood furniture and the lacquer furniture that dominated aristocratic French collections.³⁵⁸ Whilst Beurdeley's contribution to the development of the historiography did not provide seminal new insights, his eclectic but sciolistic approach both to the selection of furniture served to extend the scholarship to new avenues, encompassing lacquer, bamboo and inlaid softwood furniture. Margaret Medleys' critical review of what may be considered Beardsley's best-known work on Castiglione's paintings characterised his work as "superficial" and concluded: "the content in effect comprises a series of brief only slightly related essays, which do little to resolve the puzzling uncertainties enshrouding the central figure."³⁵⁹ This diverse and wide-ranging approach applied to Beurdeley's writing on Chinese furniture. The examples selected to feature in the book did not apparently seek to discriminate on grounds of taste or craftsmanship but to represent as broad a range of materials as possible: the only furniture material not represented is stone.

Beurdeley disclosed that he had derived much of his information from Ellsworth's earlier 1970 publication, *Chinese Furniture: Hardwood Examples*, though he extended scholarship on furniture in several areas pertaining to the later development of an analysis of material culture.³⁶⁰ As part of a section on "The Art of Living in China" he addressed the taste of the elite scholar official class, in particular a translation of the treatise by playwright and scholar Li Yu 李渔 (1611-1680), creator of the famous Mustard Seed Garden and author of the Ming lifestyle text *Xianqing Ouji* 闲情偶寄 (Leisurely Thoughts). In reviewing Li Yu's perspectives on the use of furniture in the context of a Ming literati lifestyle and the use of furniture in the architectural context of the traditional courtyard house, Beurdeley expanded on preexisting cultural and historical references.

Beurdeley's *Chinese Furniture* provided insight into the tastes of European collectors at the end of the 1970s. In this respect, its publication serves as a regional counterpart to Ellsworth's focus on pieces in North American collections. Ellsworth's *Chinese Hardwood Furniture* included pieces from some of the most respected private and

³⁵⁸ See Camille Mestdagh and Pierre Lécoules. 2010. *L'ameublement d'Art Français: 1850-1900*. Paris: Éditions de l'Amateur. 128-129.

³⁵⁹ Margaret Medley, "Book Review of Cécile and Michel Beurdeley: *Giuseppe Castiglione: A Jesuit Painter at the Court of the Chinese Emperors*," translated by Michael Bullock, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 36, no. 2 (1973): 498-499. Downloaded May 24, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/613550>. 498.

³⁶⁰ Beurdeley, *Chinese Furniture*, 69.

institutional Asian art collections in America, indicating the full prestige of Ellsworth's American client base. Similarly, Beurdeley was employed as an expert in East Asian art with the Paris auction house Drouot and the collectors and collections referenced in *Chinese Furniture* read as an assemblage of Drouot's best European clients. Robert Rousset, who had founded *La Compagnie de la Chine et des Indes* in 1935 contributed ten percent of the items included in the book; whilst items either from or formerly in the collection of C.T. Loo amounted to almost 20%.³⁶¹ Works from European collections comprised almost ninety percent of those featured in the book, within which approximately ten percent derived from the Musée Guimet's collection. Other furniture pieces featured came from the collection of the Kunstindustrimuseet in Copenhagen and the Victoria and Albert Museum. Unlike Ellsworth, Beurdeley appears to have operated principally as a retained expert in Drouot's service rather than as an independent commercial dealer. Though authored and attributed to Beurdeley, the book appears to have been written under the French auction house's patronage and references the collections of individuals and institutions that may have been among the company's most prestigious clients and business associates.

Beurdeley's impartial and equitable approach to his subject matter was in fact skewed towards the more ornate style of Chinese furniture which gives a key indication that the refined styles favoured by American clients may not have been similarly favoured by continental European collectors. Only thirty-nine percent of furniture items in the book can be classified as hardwood furniture in the 'classical' Chinese style. The majority of items featured included myriad forms in lacquered, inlaid, enamelled and porcelain furniture with a section dedicated to bamboo and spotted bamboo furniture. It is likely that this selection of items attests to the tastes of French collectors at the time which the book suggests had not altered significantly in the fifty-five years that had passed since Odilon Roche published *Les Meubles de la Chine*.³⁶² Thus, between France's Third Republic (1870-1940) and its Fifth (1953 to the present time), the appetite of the country's elite collectors remained consistently oriented towards the richly decorative Chinese imperial aesthetic rather than the meritocratic scholarly style which had taken root among American collectors. As Howard Link remarked in *Chinese Hardwood Furniture in Hawaiian Collections*, the catalogue publication to an exhibition held at Honolulu Academy of Arts in 1982: "Today much of the best Chinese hardwood furniture of the Ming and early Ch'ing dynasties is found in the

³⁶¹ Beurdeley noted "Jeanine [sic] Pierre-Emmanuel has just assembled for C.T. Loo in Paris a collection of furniture of the first part of the 19th Century, which demonstrates that, even in the lean years for the decorative arts, objects of taste in the best tradition were to be found". Janine Loo Pierre-Emmanuel (1920-2013) was C.T. Loo's daughter. Beurdeley, *Chinese Furniture*, 164.

³⁶² Roche, *Les Meubles de la Chine*, 1921.

United States, and to a lesser degree, in Europe.”³⁶³ If furniture collecting is characterised as an extension of interior decorating then it may be the case that the more decorative items were better suited to the grandiose architectural settings of European edifices.

Writing on nationalism and identity in French furniture collecting from the mid to late nineteenth century, Adriana Turpin has noted: “The most obvious characteristic of the revived French style was its luxury, exemplified by its gilded and elaborate decoration...this form of decoration had become established as the accepted interior of the aristocracy.”³⁶⁴ It seems reasonable to project that furniture of other cultures with similar aesthetic attributes would resonate with this mode of selection and consumption and with the architectural tenets of French *Ancienne régime* which Turpin writes “represented a recognised form of wealth and taste both internationally and nationally.”³⁶⁵

6. Establishing a Chinese art historical discourse for classic hardwood furniture

The final two decades of the twentieth century which followed the reinstitution of international relations between China and the West were fertile ground for the maturation of the Western historiography of Chinese classical furniture. This was precipitated in concert with two significant events: firstly, a significant shift in awareness of Chinese furniture as both collectable commodity and art form; and secondly, the gradual opening up of China’s borders which resulted in an influx of new pieces from the mainland for sale through Hong Kong’s open market and thriving antiques scene. Recognising the commercial potential of the subject matter and the significant arbitrage opportunity for those who were able to procure items on the Chinese mainland, dealers in Hong Kong began to specialise in the procurement of furniture to satisfy a (then) mostly Western audience of collectors. At the same time, the establishment and then subsequent dissolution at auction of the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture’s collection in Apollo, California between 1990 and 1996 represented a watershed moment in establishing a price level for Chinese furniture as a category of art which elevated its status in the international art market.³⁶⁶ This escalation of

³⁶³ Howard A. Link, Robert Hatfield Ellsworth, and Honolulu Academy of Arts. 1982. *Chinese Hardwood Furniture in Hawaiian Collections : [Exhibition]*. Honolulu: Honolulu Academy of Arts. 17.

³⁶⁴ Adriana Turpin. (2019). “Appropriation as a Form of Nationalism? Collecting French Furniture in the Nineteenth Century” in *Art Crossing Borders: The Internationalisation of the Art Market in the Age of Nation States, 1750-1914*. 220-255, 239. Eds. Jan Dirk Baetens and Lyna Dries (Leiden: Brill, 2019). 10.1163/9789004291997_009.

³⁶⁵ Turpin, “Appropriation as a Form of Nationalism?”, 251.

³⁶⁶ The Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture was established by an American group known as “The Fellowship of Friends” or the “Followers of Gurdjieff.” The museum which opened in September 1990

collecting and marketing activity, to be considered more fully in the final chapter of this thesis, had a commensurately instigative effect on the associated literature, and to a lesser extent on the research which underpinned this new writing. The Museum also published a periodical, *Journal of the Classical Chinese Furniture Society* between 1991 and 1994. The journal was a useful resource for students of Chinese furniture, containing a number of republished lectures that might otherwise have been lost or difficult to procure.³⁶⁷

The rapid escalation in value, collectability and interest in Chinese furniture created a commercial imperative for a commensurate increase in the dissemination of knowledge in this area, resulting in an upsurge in the number of articles and publications. From this point onward, the literature can be characterised into three principal strands, the combination of which informs an understanding of attitudes and approaches to Chinese classical furniture as a discreet category of art up to the present time:

1. Academic research, including scientific research on wood species and genera;
2. Cultural research, such as that relevant to the material and social culture of the Ming dynasty.
3. Catalogue style publications, typically authored by dealers and commercial specialists in the field and exhibition catalogues;

The interrelationships, dependencies and distinctions between these three areas of research and combined to inform our present understanding on the topic merits consideration. The first and least prolific strand is academic literature and research on the topic. With the exception of Klaas Ruitenbeek's *Carpentry and Building in Late Imperial China: A Study of the Fifteenth Century Carpenter's Manual Lu Ban Jing*, published by E.J. Brill as part of its *Sinica Leidensia* series in 1993, there are currently no book length published monographs from Western universities or institutions which focus on the subject of Chinese furniture. Broadening the scope to include museum publications and books by independent scholars expands the count to around five. This group includes Craig Clunas' *Chinese Furniture* and Sarah Handler's two publications, *Austere Luminosity of Classical Chinese Furniture* and

and closed in 1996. The museum's significance to Chinese furniture collecting is considered in the final chapter of this thesis.

³⁶⁷ In particular, Laurence Sickman's lecture to the Oriental Ceramics Society in London from 1978, (*Classical Chinese Furniture: Laurence Sickman*, 1978. *Journal of the Classical Chinese Furniture Society*, Spring 1994 Vol. 4 No. 2, pp. 56-69. Notes from a lecture by William Drummond dated to 1969 are also documented (*Chinese Furniture: The Sackler Collections: William M. Drummond, Early Scholarship*. Summer 1993 Vol. 3 No.3. 54-66.

Ming Furniture in the Light of Chinese Architecture.³⁶⁸ The essays written by Clunas, Handler, Nancy Berliner and others for the exhibition catalogue *Beyond The Screen: Chinese Furniture of the 16th and 17th Centuries*, published by the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, also add to this category.³⁶⁹

With the exception of Handler's books which were published independently of any institution, both Clunas' and Berliner's writing on the topic focuses on specific museum collections of Chinese furniture. Clunas' book was written during his time as curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and *Beyond the Screen* accompanied an exhibition at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Sarah Handler's Ph.D. thesis focused on the collection of Chinese furniture in the galleries at the NAMA in Kansas City, presenting a scientific study and overview of the collection constructed by Laurence Sickman.³⁷⁰ Her familiarity with this collection and others in public museums in America is evident in her selection of illustrations and examples although it is noticeable that, in a departure from earlier authors, the majority of photographs of selected pieces are simply attributed to Christie's auction house without further associated provenance.

In actuality thirty-nine pieces of furniture from a total of eighty-eight (approximately 44%) represented in *Austere Luminosity of Chinese Furniture* which are unattributed to a specific collection (image credited to Christie's) derive from the former collection of the Museum of Chinese Classical Furniture where Handler had been employed as a curator. During her tenure at the Museum, she had published a number of articles in the JCCFS which formed the chapters of *Austere Luminosity of Chinese Furniture*, published collectively as a book in 2001. Handler would have acquired expert knowledge of the furniture collection at the NAMA in Kansas in the course of her doctoral research and a further twelve percent of the pieces illustrated are attributed to the Museum's collection. Commensurate with the convergence between Western and Chinese scholarship which Ellsworth's publications precipitated, a similar number of pieces derived from Chinese collections, mostly featured in Wang Shixiang's early publications with one item cited as being in the collection of the Palace Museum in Beijing. Through her work with Wang Shixiang translating "*Classic Chinese Furniture: Ming and Early Qing Dynasties*" Handler was similarly familiar with pieces included in Wang's books and furniture from this source and the Palace Museum

³⁶⁸ Clunas, *Chinese Furniture*, 1988. Written during Clunas' tenure as a curator of Asian art at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Handler, *Austere Luminosity of Chinese Furniture*, 2001; Handler, *Ming Furniture in the Light of Chinese Architecture*, 2005.

³⁶⁹ Nancy Zeng Berliner, ed. 1996. *Beyond the Screen: Chinese Furniture of the 16th and 17th Centuries*. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts Publications.

³⁷⁰ Handler. 1982. *Pieces in Context*. Ph.D. Dissertation.

comprise a thirteen-percent of pieces included in *Austere Luminosity*, with eleven-percent from the MIA collection.

The furniture examples selected for inclusion in Handler's books were constructed almost exclusively from *huanghuali* and *zitan*, adhering to the "classical" designation and the tendencies of patriciate collectors. The book Handler authored together with Nancy Berliner, *Friends of the House*, to accompany an exhibition of the same name at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts in 1996, varied this approach and put on display furniture and accoutrements constructed principally in elmwood (*jumu*) from houses and villages in China.³⁷¹ These pieces were selected by Berliner and had been acquired by her whilst resident in China. The process and methods of acquisition are set out in the accompanying essay, with the description and analysis of the pieces on display provided by Handler. Descriptions of her interactions with the residents of villages in remote Northern provinces, notably Shaanxi and Shandong, are presented as significant to the quotidian social characteristics of the group of furniture and objects collected represented.

Berliner's emphasis on the human experience of furniture in use in domestic dwellings is distinct from Handler's approach with its focused on structural and architectural aspects of furniture, demonstrated most clearly in *Ming Furniture in the Light of Chinese Architecture*. Handler's essay in *Friends of the House*, "An Epiphany of Recognition" similarly addressed the formal aspects of classical, rather than vernacular, furniture including joinery, form and stylistic elements.³⁷² Berliner's chapter "Friends of the House" which featured photographic records of furniture in use in proletariat dwellings, (Figure 2.26) moved the dialectic towards an indigenous social history of furniture, noting the artificial divides that are created by the attachment of appellations such as "fine" or "vernacular" and the relativity of social differentiation and meaning.³⁷³ The exhibition record provides an opportunity to compare indigenous vernacular furniture in less highly regarded woods with those regarded as collector's items. For example, a low-backed *jumu* "rose" chair at catalogue item 16 (Figure 2.27) bears stylistic similarity with a pair of *huanghuali* sold by Christie's at auction in 2014.³⁷⁴ (Figure 2.28)

Together with Sarah Handler's work on Chinese furniture, Clunas' *Chinese Furniture* continues to represent the academic apex of Western historiography on the topic,

³⁷¹ Nancy Berliner and Sarah Handler (1995). *Friends of the House: Furniture from China's Towns and Villages*. Peabody Essex Museum Collections. Salem, Massachusetts.

³⁷² Handler, "An Epiphany of Recognition" in *Friends of the House*, 39-37.

³⁷³ Berliner, *Friends of the House*, 12-13.

³⁷⁴ Berliner, *Friends of the House*, 96-97.

though as described above, one which is fully aligned to collecting practices. The paucity of scholarly attention that has been awarded to this area of Chinese art has been counterbalanced to some degree by the extent and quality of catalogues and publications by commercial authorities. This most likely reflects the economic reality that despite escalating financial values, as a category, Chinese furniture continues to be at the perimeter of art historical research in America and the UK. To the extent that any connection can be established between art market estimations of value and scholarly research, based on anecdotal evidence it may be conceded that the values for furniture either at auction or in the dealer's showroom do not ascend to the lofty heights reached by the 'finer' arts of painting, porcelain or sculpture. These more elite art forms appear to attract greater levels of scholarly analysis and research. This is ostensibly true both in the West and in China though to the writer's knowledge no research exists to substantiate a link between art market value and the output of institutional research.

Clunas' book documented the larger part of the Victoria and Albert ('V&A') Museum's comprehensive collection of furniture items, gathered within the sanctifying space of a public institution with the purpose of instructing and edifying the general population, through a process of direct acquisition and gifts from benefactors. As indicated by the book's title, *Chinese Furniture* did not selectively focus on hardwood furniture although many examples of classic Ming style furniture are featured in the collection. A number of these were bequeathed by the British diplomat and collector Sir John Mansfield Addis (1914-1983) who was stationed in China in service to the British Foreign Office between 1947 and 1957 and as Ambassador to China from 1972-74. Although Addis' collection of Yuan and early Ming dynasty porcelain, gifted to the British Museum in 1972, is relatively well documented, that the furniture bequest is less well recorded is indicative of the relative significance of furniture within the museum hierarchy.³⁷⁵

The selection of examples featured in the book was dictated by the breadth of representative examples in the Museum's Chinese furniture collection. Clunas noted that Chinese furniture as a concept was "a construct of the investigator" and not a homogeneous group which could be classified chronologically or by reference to material or style.³⁷⁶ Of the fifty pieces selected for inclusion, just over fifty percent were constructed in *huali*, with a total of sixty-six percent in hardwoods and the remainder in lacquer. Of the ten pieces

³⁷⁵ See Frank Davis. "Yuan Porcelain at its best: The Addis Collection." *Country Life* 159, issue 4115 (1976):1272.

³⁷⁶ Clunas, *Chinese Furniture*, 7.

deriving from the Addis bequest, nine were in *huali* wood; the exception being a camphor wood clothes chest.

Clunas made two critical observations relative to the early literature of Ecke that corroborate the importance of nonpartisan, independent scholarly research:

1. The early writers resident in Beijing in the 1930s assumed that the furniture they saw in the courtyard homes of the old Qing scholarly families in Beijing was uniquely representative of an unchanging and superlatively authentic indigenous taste among an educated Chinese elite.
2. That a substantive divide existed in China during the Ming and Qing dynasties between a preference for lacquered furniture and hardwood furniture; and moreover that all lacquered furniture was either rustic and or ornate and embellished; and in this latter case, of poor taste.³⁷⁷

With regards to lacquer furniture, he surmised that “whole classes of material, principally the plain lacquered furniture” described in literary Ming sources espousing good taste have been lost.³⁷⁸ Although surviving pieces are extremely rare due to the vulnerability of the softwood base medium, this statement is not entirely correct. As I have noted, a small number of early lacquered furniture in the classical style can be identified in both private collections and at auction. (Figure 2.29)

In “Sources for the Study of Chinese Furniture” Clunas referenced key literary sources from the Ming dynasty which would later form the basis of research on material culture.³⁷⁹ Reference to Ming literary taste makers such as Wen Zhenheng, Li Yu and Gao Lian provided material first hand evidence for attitudes towards furniture during the Ming dynasty and the circumstances of furniture production rather than visual interpretation of materials or design or specific items of furniture. Analysis of these sources and others objectively elevated the discourse on Chinese classical furniture towards an art historical narrative and enhancing the status of the object as cultural agent, capable of transmitting social significance in a similar way to more traditionally elite art forms. The writing of Ming tastemakers also provided a romantic socio-cultural lens through which Chinese classical furniture can be incorporated into a narrative landscape of historical and aesthetic ideologies

³⁷⁷ Clunas, *Chinese Furniture*, 104-5.

³⁷⁸ Clunas, *Chinese Furniture*, 7.

³⁷⁹ Clunas, *Chinese Furniture*, 9-13.

which transcend physical analysis and provide an alternative to what Clunas labelled “vapid connoisseurship.”³⁸⁰

Clunas’ approach towards situating furniture objects in a framework of material culture consciously varied the approach taken in earlier historiography which referenced physical properties such as materials, construction and joinery and decorative elements to chart a reconstructive linear dialectic. Walter Benjamin’s (1892-1940) “material historicism” is useful in understanding the departure between the literature of later art historians such as Clunas and earlier connoisseurship, whether academic or commercial. In more recent years, scholarly research and commentary on Chinese furniture has been included within a wider field of study on Chinese material culture within the context of sociopolitical and economic metamorphosis in the Ming and Qing dynasties that gave rise to a cultural dynamic conducive to the formation of collective tastes and self-identification. Studies on material culture aim to situate the object within a broader sociological narrative which illuminates historical modalities through a transcendent cross-disciplinary evidence-based research approach. Michael Yonan has observed that this approach to cultural and material studies unites anthropology, archaeology and sociology, layering a synthesis of methodologies to create a prognosticative historical analysis around objects where limited textual information requires the application of alternative source materials.³⁸¹ Whilst analysis of material culture encompasses a far wider spectrum of objects than furniture production and consumption, the illumination of circumstances and preferences of the elite Chinese classes which accelerated production of the applied arts draws together relevant pictorial and literary sources to illuminate prevailing attitudes towards the creation of furniture and other craft objects in the Ming and Qing dynasties. The study of both material culture from the Ming onward, perpetuated by Craig Clunas, Jonathan Hay and others, and objects in motion within a global paradigm, has created both a framework of ideologies around which both knowledge-based theories and idealised historical narratives can be structured. Anticipating further research in material culture studies, the closing paragraph of Clunas’ *Chinese Furniture* submits: “Questions put forward by the surviving as well as the lost body of material bears upon the whole of our understanding of traditional Chinese culture.”³⁸²

The most abundant category of historiographic literature derived from the second strand of literature referenced above, that of catalogues published by dealers, auction houses

³⁸⁰ Clunas, *Chinese Furniture*, 7.

³⁸¹ Michael Yonan. “Toward a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies.” *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 18, no. 2 (2011): 232-248, 232.
<https://doi.org/10.1086/662520>.

³⁸² Clunas, *Chinese Furniture*, 106.

and commercial experts in the field. The key international authorities publishing in both English and Chinese language are Grace Wu Bruce (1949-), Curtis Evarts, Nicholas Grindley (1951-) and Tian Jiaqing 田家青 (1953-) who have published extensively on extant furniture pieces either in monograph form or in contribution to edited works. Commercial dealers benefit from the acquisition of significant practical knowledge of objects through the formation and cataloguing of private and institutional collections. Here the interdependence between institutional cultural knowledge and experiential object-based acuity acquired in handling objects is most in evidence. Concurrently, a void in scholarly research in Chinese furniture as a niche subject area and an economic interest in the commodity value of objects as a heuristic for establishing provenance and a requirement to procure the best objects for public collections requires collaboration between commercial and museum spheres.

Typically, dealer-derived or institutional publications focus on single-owner collections and are typically either self-published or authored by a third party and the printing funded by the collector. These publications are a critical element in provenance creation and in evidencing the embodiment of the collection. Perhaps the best example of this type is *Classical Chinese Furniture in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts*, which compounds connoisseurly or commercial expertise and institutional integrity with the laic experiential insights of the collector. Multi-author publications such as this one amalgamate a confluence of individualised, formalistic and art historical writing from collector, commercial expert and curator.³⁸³ The Preface was contributed by the collectors Ruth and Bruce Drayton; the Introduction by Lark E. Mason Jr., formerly of Sotheby's; an art historical essay entitled "Classical Chinese Furniture and the Built Environment" by Robert D. Jacobsen, Curator of Asian Art at MIA; and catalogue descriptions by the Chinese furniture dealer Nicholas Grindley. The relationship between the dealer and collector results in the dealer authoring and collating the pieces into a catalogue style, monographic publication, prefaced with details relative to the formation of the collection.

³⁸³ Robert D. Jacobsen and Nicholas Grindley (1999) *Classical Chinese Furniture in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

CHAPTER 3: NARRATING AN ENDEMIC HISTORIOGRAPHY OF CHINESE HARDWOOD FURNITURE

Fifty years ago, I wept over the tragic destruction of ancient furniture, and in recent years, I have been saddened by its theft, shipment and subsequent emptying out from my country, leading to its disappearance in China. The publication of my humble work has unexpectedly resulted in such consequences, leaving me feeling helpless.³⁸⁴

Wang Shixiang, *Mingshi Jiaju Cuizhen*, 1997

From 1942 onwards, Chinese connoisseurs and scholars had begun to chart their own coextensive cultural history of fine indigenous furniture.³⁸⁵ The penultimate chapter of this thesis examines the historical conditions and paradigms that gave rise to a renewed appreciation of Chinese traditional crafts and applied arts of all forms including furniture in the early part of the twentieth century. Addressing the coaction between Chinese scholarship and collecting of hardwood furniture from the 1940s onwards, the following analysis examines the syntheses and departures between the ideologies and positioning between the Chinese and Western historiographies as a basis for comparative analysis. As described in the preceding chapters, a shifting aesthetic dialectical which coetaneously defined and facilitated the Western collecting and literature required in the codification of historic Chinese furniture which resonated with connoisseurs of variant nationalities. The academic acculturation which precipitated the globalised appreciation of Ming-style furniture and the supporting literary evidence for an endemic narrative of Chinese furniture should be read within a wider geopolitical construct.

The dissolution of Qing imperial models of government and establishment of the PRC required the systematic and comprehensive redefinition of a broader cultural and art historical narrative in China as an alternative to the absolutist expression of art attached to the imperial regime. As structural socioeconomic and political change in the West in the early twentieth century precipitated the advent of modernism in architectural design, a similar aesthetic re-evaluation in China accompanied the reverberative sociopolitical

³⁸⁴ Wang Shixiang, 1997. *Mingshi Jiaju Cuizhen* 明式家具萃珍 (Masterpieces from the Museum of Classical Chinese furniture). Tenth Union International Inc. vii-viii. Original Chinese text in Appendix 1.

³⁸⁵ As described in this chapter, the earliest monograph on Chinese furniture in any language was published in 1942 in Chinese by Yang Yao.

transition from imperial to republican rule. As Sebastiano Timpanaro has commented in “On Materialism” “Great transformations and differentiations of society... arise fundamentally as consequences of changes in economic structures... the division of humanity into social classes explains its history infinitely.”³⁸⁶ In China, the furniture and accoutrements of the scholar-literati provided a nationalistic cultural and artistic heritage which synchronously articulated a non-imperialist historical narrative which resonated with a modernising international aesthetic trajectory.

1. Nationalism and ideology: Cultural and academic exchange between China and the West

The extent to which academic and cultural exchange between China, North America and Europe shaped the concepts and approach foundational to a literary focus on Chinese historic furniture in the early twentieth-century merits consideration in the context of the formation of a revitalised Chinese cultural narrative during this period. By the 1940s, a substantial number of Chinese academics working at China’s most prestigious universities had spent time researching and (in some cases) teaching at distinguished American, European and Japanese institutions. The founding of Tsinghua and Peking Universities in 1911 and 1898 fomented international exposure and exchange for foreign and Chinese academics. The establishment of American educational institutions such as the Harvard Yenching Institution in 1924, the Yale-in-China Association in 1934 and the PUMC in 1917, propagated global academic heuristics in China. In the decline of China’s dynastic system with its established model of Confucian learning and official examinations, education in China became a highly politicised subject which was interwoven with China’s place in international affairs. Su-Yan Pan, Qingjia Edward Wang and others have commented on the objectives and intentions on both Chinese and Western parts of a cross-cultural academic exchange which prompted the establishment of Tsinghua University in 1911, financed by money from the Boxer Indemnity Funds.³⁸⁷

The dualistic effect of political transformation and nationalist sentiment which engendered an examination of international academic models was counter-balanced by a

³⁸⁶ Sebastiano Timpanaro. 1996. “On Materialism”. In Jerry Palmer & Dodson (Eds.), *Design and Aesthetics*. 73-76. Routledge, London and New York. 74.

³⁸⁷ Su-Yan Pan. 2006. “Economic globalization, politico-cultural identity and university autonomy: the struggle of Tsinghua University in China”. *Journal of Education Policy*, 21(3), 245-266. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930600600242> and Qingjia Edward Wang (1994) “Guests from the Open Door: The Reception of Chinese Students into the United States, 1900s—1920s.”

patriotic attachment to traditional learning models and the desire to modernise Chinese education within a domestic framework which accounted for national characteristics. This determinative coaction, reciprocity and reconciliation between modernity and tradition, and internationalism and autochthony remained a consistent polemic in the literature of the period, including on Chinese architecture and furniture.³⁸⁸ An increasingly globalised educational paradigm synchronously facilitated academic exchange and fomented uneasy tensions and connotations of cultural imperialism associated with the rise of nationalist sentiment in China, which required classical teaching methodologies to be applied within a formalistic modern Chinese historiography, breaking with past traditions.³⁸⁹ Inherent in the formation of a cross-cultural discourse of Chinese furniture was the requirement to balance national and international interests and ideologies and both the Chinese and Western historiography demonstrated evidence of a robust intellectual and cultural exchange.

The extent and application of this parallel and interwoven dialogue and its impact on the resultant literature should be considered with particular relevance to the study of Chinese furniture in China by Yang Yao, Chen Mengjia and Wang Shixiang alongside figures of cultural significance involved with the promotion of Chinese architecture and traditional crafts such as Zhu Qiqian 朱啟鈐 (1872-1964). In charting the formation of a Chinese historiography of indigenous furniture, particular emphasis will be given to the research and collecting activities and literary output of these authoritative scholarly figures who played a seminal, though often underacknowledged, role in establishing and elevating the status of Chinese furniture within the lexicon of cultural heritage in China. The contribution and activities of Yang, Chen and Wang will be examined here in detail to the extent afforded by the relative availability of research materials.

The materialisation of a modern Chinese historiography of furniture from the 1940s onwards ensued within an environment of political instability dominated by military conflict on an interregional level with Japan during the period leading up to the Second World War (1939-1945) and culminating in the apex of the Chinese civil war between the Kuomintang and Chinese Communist Party (1945-1949). A combination of domestic and international

³⁸⁸ See Fan Shuhua, "To Educate China in the Humanities and Produce China Knowledge in the United States: The Founding of the Harvard-Yenching Institute, 1924—1928" in *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, Vol. 16, No. 4, (Winter 2009), 251-283. At the same time as philanthropic groups such as the Rockefeller Foundation were actively engaging in China, the Chinese Exclusion Act enacted in 1882 to prevent the entry of working-class Chinese citizens into America was not fully repealed until after 1950.

³⁸⁹ No direct reference intended to the late Qing official Zhang Zhidong's 张之洞 (1837-1909) advocacy under the 'Self-Strengthening Movement' of "Chinese learning as substance, Western learning for application" from Zhidong's 1898 'Exhortation to Study' *Quanxue pian* [劝学篇]. Title translation from Karl-Heinz Pohl. 2018. *Li Zehou and Confucian Philosophy*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. 57.

conflict, Japanese hostility and a hazardous macropolitical environment provided a dynamic but unpredictable backdrop for the transformation of intellectual and cultural ideas amplified and assimilated by anxieties and schisms. Thus, the early modern literature relevant to classic Chinese furniture is considered here in the context of concomitant and potentially contrariant intellectual and politicised ideologies. In *Fragmenting Modernisms: Chinese Wartime Literature, Art, and Film*, Caroline Fitzgerald has noted the search for Chinese equivalence to the Modernist movement, proposing that the advent of the First World War (1914-1918) led Chinese intellectuals to look towards China's established heritage as a basis for regeneration and to reject an unquestioning acceptance of the "Westernised modernity" espoused by the New Culture and May Fourth movements.³⁹⁰ Fitzgerald posits that the affirmation of domestic traditions provided a platform for the reinvigoration and appreciation of Chinese crafts and applied arts (relevant to the receptivity of 'Ming style' furniture in China) which was unequivocally Chinese and yet for reasons which will be elaborated on in this and subsequent chapters aligned with global aesthetic perspectives on modernity.

The materialisation of a body of endemic literature on Chinese hardwood furniture spans a period of about half a century, commencing with the formative publication of *Zhongguo Mingdai shinei zhuangshi he jiaju* by Yang Yao in 1942 and achieving maturation in the seminal writing of Wang Shixiang. Although the quantum of research produced by Chinese writers on indigenous historical furniture in the span of this fifty-year period appears narrow by comparison with the output of Western writers on the topic, this small group of key academic and scholarly figures in China played a critical role in recognizing the importance of furniture to China's cultural heritage. At the same time, it is critical to examine the literature of the period in the context of exceptional social and economic circumstances surrounding the establishment of the CCP as the ruling power in 1949 and political circumstances within China to 1978. The promulgation by the CCP of ideologies and precepts antithetical to a bourgeois intelligentsia suppressed academic innovation and can reasonably be presumed to have restrained the potential for relevant scholarship. Action against scholars under the 'Thought Reform' campaign (思想改造, *sixiang gaizao*) (1951-52) and in the 'Rectification' (整风, *zhengfeng*) (1942-45) and 'Anti-Rightist' (反右运动, *fangyao yundong*) (1957-1959) movements designed to inculcate Marxist and Leninist doctrines and support Chinese socialism sustained for almost two decades under Mao

³⁹⁰ Carolyn FitzGerald. *Fragmenting Modernisms: Chinese Wartime Literature, Art, and Film, 1937-49*, Brill, 2013. ProQuest Ebook Central. Accessed 2 June 2022.
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/detail.action?docID=1214127>. 17.

Zedong's 毛泽东 (1893-1976) leadership (1949-1976).³⁹¹ Both the 'Anti Rightist' campaign and the campaign against the 'Four Olds' (*Si jiu* 四旧) were conceptually and diametrically opposed to the development of fields of scholarship related to elite culture and the arts. Although the specific impact on the development of a Chinese historiography of Ming furniture cannot be estimated with certainty, Andreas Joel has characterised the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) as an attack on established political and cultural capital as central to the CCP's efforts to inculcate new educational and economic models.³⁹² Conversely, Denise Ho has reflected that whilst the 'Four Olds' campaign resulted in looting and burning of old books, buildings and art works, it also precipitated the establishment of preservation campaigns. She notes that provincial government cultural relics departments continued to operate throughout the Cultural Revolution, with the CCP appropriating privately held collections at scale. Ho submits that the act of dispersal effectively legitimised the Party's ownership of state cultural heritage and assets and, by extension, its claim to sovereignty.³⁹³

As described previously in this thesis, the contemporary revaluation of China's furniture heritage from a technical and artistic standpoint was intrinsically interconnected with the study of historical architectural forms and elevation in status of China's built heritage and environment. The architectural and archaeological research in which Chinese academics including Liang Sicheng 梁思成 (1901-1972), Wang Shixiang and Chen Mengjia engaged in collaboration with their Western counterparts, for example, through the SRCA has been noted in previous chapters for the substantial contribution these individuals made to stimulating interest in China's architectural and furniture heritage. Liang Sicheng and Zhu Qiqian did not directly add to the literature on Chinese furniture; rather, their significance to the promulgation of the subject matter lies in the promotion of research on China's architectural heritage which proved foundational for Yang, Ecke and others. The role of these agents in expanding the field of scholarly analysis to the applied and decorative arts and by extension towards a study of furniture construction and materials requires further examination.

³⁹¹ See Brian James DeMare. "Casting (Off) Their Stinking Airts: Chinese Intellectuals and Land Reform, 1946-52." *The China Journal*, no. 67 (2012): 109-30. <https://doi.org/10.1086/665742>.

³⁹² Joel Andreas, "Battling over Political and Cultural Power during the Chinese Cultural Revolution" in *Theory and Society*, Vol. 31, No. 4, August 2002, 463-519 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3108513>.

³⁹³ Denise Y. Ho, "Revolutionizing Antiquity: The Shanghai Cultural Bureaucracy in the Cultural Revolution, 1966-1968" in *The China Quarterly*, September 2011, No. 207, September 2011, 687-705. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41305263>.

Establishment of a post-dynastic school of Chinese art history conducive to the elevation in esteem of a Chinese furniture tradition was accelerated by several causative and interdependent factors. The first of these was a renewed interest in an autochthonous material and cultural heritage in China which provided for a more inclusive perspective on the categorisation of objects deemed relevant to the formation of an art historical narrative. It may be argued that the failure of Qing rule and ensuing cessation of the dynastic system in China sanctioned the determination of an account of Chinese history which included the definition of a moralising visual and aesthetic rhetoric of power as an alternative to a monolithic imperialistic cultural history. In his study on the end of the Qing dynasty, Daniel Leese has written of a “fundamental transformation of all spheres within state and society” theorising that the change of power in China that accompanied the end of the Qing dynasty provoked a critical re-examination and a renewed discourse on concepts of national identity and sovereignty which by extension entailed the formation of a reinvigorated catechism of socio-political ideologies and associated notions of semaphoric and symbolic display.³⁹⁴

The reinvention of the Chinese state in the post dynastic era and the revitalisation and reconstruction of the role of the scholar in the Republican era (1912-1949) was accompanied by a requirement for a modernised narrative of the history of Chinese art. In *Reinventing Modern China*, Huaiyin Li describes the construction and reconstruction of a Chinese historiography during the Republican period which sought to determine an account of China not simply from the point of view of a single autocratic imperial ruler but from the perspective of a wider political and cultural elite, seemingly analogous to Western historiographies which emphasised the role of nation over state.³⁹⁵ It may be contended that the end of a totalitarian political regime required the concomitant provision of a national narrative in which a more pluralistic society and its creations played a greater role.

Independent of the profound effects of political regime change within China and its fundamental and implicit structural impact on the reception of the visual arts, the coincident presence of Western expatriate academics within China and returning Chinese scholars educated in Western learning institutions further mobilised the formation of an internationalised domestic doctrine of art history. The custom of intellectual and intercultural exchange on a broad range of practical and philosophical subjects between Chinese rulers

³⁹⁴ Daniel Leese. 2012. ““Revolution”: Conceptualising Political and Social Change in the Late Qing Dynasty’, in *Oriens Extremus*, 2012, Vol. 51 (2012), pages. 25-61: 27, 42. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24047786>.

³⁹⁵ Huaiyin Li, *Reinventing Modern China: Imagination and Authenticity in Chinese Historical Writing* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013). <https://uhpress.hawaii.edu/title/reinventing-modern-china-imagination-and-authenticity-in-chinese-historical-writing/>.

and the West had been securely established under the Qing court and perpetuated by the ongoing presence of missionaries in China. A bilateral transactional discourse on artistic development and noble tastes in Europe and in the near and far East is well documented and has well rooted historical foundations.³⁹⁶ For example, Bonnie Cheng has noted the existence of a cross cultural exchange between nation states in Asia and Europe deriving from Silk Road trade routes and an evidential impact on tomb iconography, stone carving and sculpture which should be viewed as transformational rather than problematic or indicative of power play between dominant and submissive cultures. As Jonathan Hay has commented, substantial precedent existed for intercultural exchange in the Qing courts exoticised the novelty of European inventions in much the same way as a Western audience was abstractly compelled by the allure of an unfamiliar Saidian ‘otherness’.³⁹⁷ Similarly, Kristina Kleutghen has described how both the presence of Jesuit artists at the Qing court and the circulation of Western objects in China, which she terms “Chinese occidenterie” were reflective of the ruling dynasty’s desire to engage with and to absorb the technological developments from the West on its own terms.³⁹⁸ Later political dynamics diminished the self-confidence of the Chinese state. Economically and politically attenuating events included China’s defeat in the Opium Wars (1839-42 and 1856) and the 1900 Boxer Uprising, which according to Jie Liu were perceived to “reflect... the backwardness of Chinese society.”³⁹⁹ The balance of power in attendant transcultural artistic accords reflected the prevalent national morale as well as fiscal and military national sovereignty in either an outward or inward-looking Chinese state.

The opportunity and appetite for novelty and invention was bilateral and extended to museum and display practices as well as academic research methodologies. In this environment, a marked dissonance between a reforming desire to modernise education in China and to draw from objective Western academic methods of analysis in the sciences and humanities and uncertainty over the suitability of traditional Chinese modes of learning in a new global paradigm was met with equal concern regarding Western ethical morality and the essentiality of Chinese sovereignty. Zhuran You has observed that educational reform and anxiety over jurisdictional propriety was a subject of deep debate among Chinese

³⁹⁶ Bonnie Cheng, “The Space Between: Locating ‘Culture’ in Artistic Exchange,” *Ars Orientalis*, vol. 38, 2010, pp. 81-120. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29550021>. Accessed 15 Aug. 2024.

³⁹⁷ Jonathan Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces*. 39.

³⁹⁸ Kristina Kleutghen, ‘Chinese Occidenterie: The Diversity of “Western” Objects in Eighteenth-Century China’ in *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 2, Special Issue: Eighteenth-Century Easts and Wests (Winter 2014), 117-135. Downloaded from 130.209.6.61.

³⁹⁹ Jie Liu, “China’s Views of History: The Prospect of Changing Self-Image,” *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 2, no. 1 (2013): 55-76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24761028.2013.11869057>.

intellectuals and reformers in post-dynastic China at this critical juncture in history.⁴⁰⁰ However it is evident that the presence of Western institutions and scholars such as Gustav Ecke and John Ferguson in the first half of the twentieth century in China, combined with the tertiary education in Europe and America of the scions of Chinese intellectual families created a basis for exchange which invigorated cultural debate. The combination of a nationalising emphasis on indigenous applied arts and a globalised intercultural discourse appears to have precipitated new Chinese lines of enquiry into the significance of China's artistic and decorative traditions.

Architectural research, with its direct relationship to the study of historic furniture and interiors, was an apropos starting point for renewed perspectives on China's endemic furniture heritage. In *Nativism and Modernity*, Ming Yan Lai expresses a recognition that faced with so called 'Westernised' modernity, Chinese intellectuals turned towards a native approach for "utopian projections and [a] discursive articulation of alternatives, even in the face of a great display of Western power". She argues that Chinese intellectuals resisted concessions to a modernising international or Western power in all areas, including in cultural fields, particularly literature, returning to a nativist *xungen* 寻根 (searching for roots) approach.⁴⁰¹ As Marc Blecher points out however, the propensity of the intelligensia may not be a *de facto* representation of social, political and economic certainties in China during the twentieth century.⁴⁰²

The importance of the SRCA and its quarterly publication, *Zhongguo yingzao xueshe huikan* 中国营造学社汇刊 (Bulletin of the Society for Research in Chinese Architecture) has been acknowledged previously in this thesis for its relevance to the participation and contribution of international scholars such as Walter Percival Yetts and Gustav Ecke working in collaboration with Chinese academics including Wang Shixiang. The intentions of the Society's founder, Zhu Qiqian, in elevating traditional Chinese crafts as a holistic and inclusive field of academic pursuit was a critical element in the establishment of a Chinese historiography of Ming and early Qing Chinese furniture. Interpreted within the context of a burgeoning school of nationalist thought in China, an important distinction between the

⁴⁰⁰ Zhuran You, Yingzi Hu, and Anthony Gordon Rud. 2018. *The Philosophy of Chinese Moral Education : A History*. Springer eBooks. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-56434-4>. Accessed 23.10.2022. 247-271.

⁴⁰¹ Ming-Yan Lai, *Nativism and Modernity: Cultural Contestations in China and Taiwan under Global Capitalism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008). <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.18253531.17-21>.

⁴⁰² Marc Blecher. 1997. *China Against the Tides*. London and Washington: Pinter. 92-93.

functions and habitual spaces occupied by architecture and furniture should be articulated relevant to the study of both fields.

Additional to the interconnection between Chinese furniture and the built environment and structural precedent of traditional Chinese buildings as a prototype for furniture design, buildings and in particular civic spaces have a public role to play in defining and representing a perceived national identity. In contrast, furniture has an intimate and domestic function which departs from the externalities of public buildings such as universities and hospitals. It should therefore not be surprising that the momentum behind the Society for Research in Chinese Architecture derived at least in part from a desire to define Chinese modernism in architecture from within China and resistance to an international, or colonialising architectural model. As Raymond Quek wrote in *Nationalism and Architecture*, by the nineteenth century the pleasurable diversions of *occidenterie* and *chinoiserie* had become a “a contest of domain...[which] was also seen in architecture [and] in the ‘civilising’ of other space through colonialisation.”⁴⁰³ It can thus be contended that in a politicised conflict between national and international ascendancy, furniture with its potentiality for ownership, transportation and use in intimate interior spaces offered a common ground for a shared discourse which could exist separately to the polemicising debate on civic architecture.

Martin Hoffman’s article on Zhu Qiqian summarises his activities from his early career as a bureaucrat which afforded remarkably free access to ancient buildings, combined with a steadfast commitment to reviving ancient texts, notably the Song dynasty text on building design, *Yingzao fashi* 营造法式 (State Building Standards) dated to 1103, and the late Ming *Yuan Ye* 园冶 (Craft of Gardens) and others. The *Yuan Ye* was formerly an obscure text written by Ming literatus Ji Cheng 计成 (1582-1642) in 1631 and republished in 1934. Little known throughout the Ming dynasty, it was rediscovered by Zhu Qiqian and pieced together from fragments found in libraries in Japan and Beijing and is now regarded as a classic text on Ming dynasty garden design. Zhu’s position in the civil service facilitated the tools, the means and the connections to promote the study of native crafts and applied arts of all forms within China. Hoffman submits that Zhu’s forays to Europe and America on government business and particularly time spent in Paris provided insights into a differentiated approach towards connoisseurship and the historicisation of both fine and applied arts.⁴⁰⁴ Zhu played a pivotal role in establishing an approach to the study of

⁴⁰³ Raymond Quek, Darren Dean and Sarah Butler (eds.). 2012. *Nationalism and Architecture*. Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing. 3.

⁴⁰⁴ Hoffman, “The Research Agenda of Zhu Qiqian”, 101.

architecture and multiple forms of Chinese craft which emulated the status afforded to craft production as a field of research he had witnessed during his international travels. The study of gardens exemplifies this. According to Liu and Chen's article on the Society's research on gardens, "With the introduction of the Western academic system of "discipline-based scholarship," China began academic research on the history of gardening."⁴⁰⁵ Zhu's research activities related to Chinese crafts were significantly wider than architecture. As Hoffman has described Zhu authored a number of treatises on traditional silk making and embroidery and compiled and republished historical documents on lacquer work and garden design as well as a collection of records on noted craftsmen following the *leishu* 类书 (encyclopaedic) model.⁴⁰⁶

As set out in the Society's official charter, its ethos and stated purpose was to engender and promote a multi-disciplinary approach to research on Chinese architecture and craft aligned with both Chinese etymology and "international standards", thus eradicating the divide between craftsmen and academics.⁴⁰⁷ In Zhu's inaugural address to the Society on 16 February 1930, he acknowledged the significance of international scholarship in the field.

The further we proceed, the more we feel that the study of Chinese architecture is not the private property of our own people. Our eastern neighbours [the Japanese] have helped us in the preservation of old genres and in strenuous research along the same lines; our western friends have helped us by offering the scientific method and discoveries in our own fields.⁴⁰⁸

Zhu's aspiration to converge and leverage the advantages of western and Chinese philology meant that Chinese and western experts of varied fields were employed alongside each other from the commencement of the Society's research agenda.⁴⁰⁹ Over time, the Society became increasingly engaged with research endeavours on a range of subjects beyond architecture,

⁴⁰⁵ Liu Tongtong 刘彤彤, Chen Fenfang 陈芬芳. 2012. 营造学社与中国造园史研究. *Yingzao Xueshe yu Zhongguo Zao yuan Shi Yanjiu*. (The Society for Chinese Architecture and Research on the History of Chinese Garden Construction). 中国园林 *Zhongguo Yuanlin (Chinese Landscape Architecture)*. 2012, 28(9): 108-111. Accessed 14 March 2021.

https://qikan.cqvip.com/Qikan/Article/Detail?id=43215250&from=Qikan_Article_Detail

⁴⁰⁶ Hoffman, "The Research Agenda of Zhu Qiqian," 103.

⁴⁰⁷ See Hoffman, "The Research Agenda of Zhu Qiqian," 106 and 135.

⁴⁰⁸ Zhu Qiqian. (1930) *Zhongguo Yingzao Xueshe Kaihui Yanci* [Inaugural address: The Society for Research in Chinese Architecture]. *Bulletin of the Society for Research of Chinese Architecture* 1, no.1 (July 1930).

⁴⁰⁹ The Society's first bulletin published in 1930 included an article on Chinese architecture by Walter Perceval Yetts, printed in both Chinese and English. Gustav Ecke also contributed several articles, including a summary of fieldwork undertaken between 1932-1937. *Monumenta Serica* Vol. 2, No. 2 (1937), 448-474.

including Chinese furniture, sculpture, textile arts and weaponry and with defining and categorising a range of crafts as a framework for the compilation of historical texts. This expressed desire to fuse approaches from east and west attests to the social and educational backgrounds of Society figures. In addition to Zhu, Liang Sicheng and his brother Liang Qixiong 梁启雄 (1900-1965) and Liu Dunzhen 刘敦桢 (1897-1968) were from scholarly families and had studied abroad.⁴¹⁰ In view of the emphasis placed on stimulating academic research in Chinese crafts, it is not surprising that eventual writers on Chinese furniture Ecke, Perceval Yetts and Wang Shixiang were also involved. The lineage of most of the individuals involved with the Society is sufficiently well documented to facilitate a comprehensive review of their social backgrounds.

2. Early Chinese historiography of Ming style furniture: Yang Yao 杨耀

An analysis of the inception of a modern Chinese historiography of Chinese Ming and Qing furniture begins with a consideration of the writing of Professor Yang Yao who authored the first modern historiographical publication on Chinese hardwood furniture. His concise illustrated booklet on Chinese furniture, *Zhongguo Mingdai shinei zhuangshi he jiaju* printed in 1942, represents the inaugural art historical treatise on the subject in any language. Yang's work has never been made available in English and he remains less well recognised internationally than Ecke or other writers on the subject. His historiographic contribution took the form of an illustrated extended essay and was published as part of the *Collected Papers of Peking University*.⁴¹¹ Yang published a total of four commentaries on furniture between 1942 and 1976, none of which have been translated into English to facilitate a comparison between the inceptual Chinese and Western approaches to the subject. These works were published in their entirety after Yang's death in 1986 in one volume by Chen Zengbi 陈增弼 (1933-2006) and will be critically examined here in the

⁴¹⁰ Shatzman Steinhardt (2014) noted that Liu Dunzhen had been educated in Japan where architectural training programmes had been initiated earlier than in China. "Chinese Architectural History in the Twenty-First Century." Nancy Shatzman Steinhardt. "Chinese Architectural History in the Twenty-First Century." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 73, No. 1 (March 2014) 38-60. Nancy Shatzman Steinhardt. "Chinese Architectural History in the Twenty-First Century." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 73, no. 1 (2014): 38-60. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jsah.2014.73.1.38>

⁴¹¹ Wang Shixiang. 1985. *Ming shi jiaju zhen shang* 明式家具珍赏 (Appreciation of Ming-style Furniture), Sanlian Bookstore (Hong Kong) Co., Ltd. 1985. 12. (Information provided in Huang Maozi's introduction). This is the Chinese language edition of *Classic Chinese Furniture: Ming and Early Qing Dynasties*.

transformative context of a changing and often precarious sociopolitical dynamic in China during the period of publication.⁴¹²

Comparison with Ecke's *Chinese Domestic Furniture* provides an opportunity to contrast the antecedent western and Chinese literature on classical Ming furniture. Analysis of Yang's 1942 *Zhongguo Mingdai shinei zhangshi he jiaju* and Ecke's 1944 *Chinese Domestic Furniture* reveals a commonality in philosophy and approach suggestive of a rich cross-cultural discourse which is perhaps best embodied by the relationship between Ecke and Yang as manifestly culturally polarised writers. As previously noted, Yang worked with (or perhaps more accurately, *for*, since a commercial basis for their relationship is assumed) Gustav Ecke in relation to the publication of Ecke's book *Chinese Domestic Furniture in Photographs and Measured Drawings*. As previously stated, the "measured drawings" referenced in the title were executed by Yang Yao; however, Yang was not referenced in the text of Ecke's book beyond an acknowledgement of the superior quality of his drafting skills in the Introduction. Most of the drawings are dated and span the period from 1935-1939 with the two earliest executed in 1935 representing a Ming cabinet and *huanghuali* 'lamp hanger' style chair. (Figure 3.1 and 3.2), both attributed to Ecke's collection.⁴¹³ It seems reasonable to assume that the drawings illustrating the construction and joinery of the pieces were antecedent to Ecke's conception of a book on the subject as *Chinese Domestic Furniture* was published nine years after the earliest drawings were executed. The architectural-style measured drawings are clearly labelled as having been executed by Yang under Ecke's direction ("G.Ecke Direx; Y. Yang Delin."), and it seems reasonable to hypothesise that the drawings were in the first instance privately commissioned by Ecke from Yang.⁴¹⁴ Ecke's bibliography also fails to recognise Yang's 1942 publication on Chinese furniture though it seems reasonable to assume that Ecke would have known of its existence given his extensive working relationship with Professor Yang.

The following short passage from the preface to the Chinese edition of Wang Shixiang's 1988 book *Mingshi jiaju zhenshang* 明式家具珍赏 (Appreciation of Ming-style Furniture) written by artist Huang Maozi 黄苗子 (1913-2012) describes the publication of Yang's monograph ahead of Ecke's, contrasting the ephemeral materials of the Peking

⁴¹² Yang *Ming shi jiaju yanjiu*.

⁴¹³ The term 'lamp hanger' refers to chairs with protruding crest rails. In traditional context, this term implies a smaller chair without arms, in contrast with those termed 'officials hat' armchairs.

⁴¹⁴ Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, Introduction (unpaginated). Ecke's acknowledgement of Yang's contribution reads: "In Mr. Yang Yueh I was fortunate to meet an artist and draughtsman of genius to interpret, in line drawing, the spirit of Chinese furniture."

University thesis with the luxuriant plates of Henri Vetch's first edition of *Chinese Domestic Furniture*.

Later, I bought a copy of Mr. Yang Yao's *Ming Dynasty Interior Decoration and Furniture in China* at the Longfu Temple secondhand bookstore. It was a very thin mimeograph pamphlet of *The Collected Theses of Peking University* in 1942... Not long after, the second-hand bookstore sent a slipcase of *Chinese Huali Furniture Illustrations* written by the German G. Ecke. The plates were very rich, and I bought it without thinking.⁴¹⁵

Huang Maozi's introductory preface to Wang Shixiang's book was only included in the Chinese edition and does not appear in the English version, published a year later in 1986, which contained a foreword by Laurence Sickman, then Director Emeritus of the NAMA. This demonstrates both Wang's respect for Sickman and, arguably, his greater authority with an English-language readership. Sickman's Foreword makes clear that the English translation is aimed towards the "Western reader" who may or may not have prior experience of the subject matter.⁴¹⁶ References to Yang Yao's writing in English language publications are exceedingly sparse, with the exception of an article by Yang translated to English and posthumously published by Chen Zengbi in the JCCFS. Certainly Gustav Ecke, who worked with Yang in the preparation of *Chinese Domestic Furniture* did not cite Yang's 1942 thesis in his bibliography, referencing his professional capacity as a draughtsman, rather than his expertise in furniture.⁴¹⁷ This is in contrast with Chen Zengbi's attribution, suggesting that Yang's role in the early research of classical furniture was regarded by Chinese scholars as formative and decisive.

My country's systematic research on Ming-style furniture as valuable cultural heritage began in the early 1930s. The first scholar in my country to devote all his energy to this is Mr. Yang Yao.⁴¹⁸

⁴¹⁵ Wang, *Mingshi jiaju zhensha*, 12. The characters 油印本 denotes "Mimeograph edition" A mimeograph machine duplicated small numbers of copies of printed material at low cost. Original text at Appendix 1.

⁴¹⁶ Wang, *Classic Chinese Furniture*, 13.

⁴¹⁷ It is possible that Yang was not at that time of sufficient social or academic status to be recognised for his contribution to research; however, Yang does not reference Ecke in his book but recognises assistance from the Dean of the School of Engineering at Peking University. Ecke's academic background as an art historian contrasts with Yang's more technical educational training.

⁴¹⁸ Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 5. Original text in Appendix 1.

In view of the personal and professional affiliation between Yang and Ecke, comparison between the writing of both authors yields insights meriting deeper contextualisation. Yang's commentaries demonstrate a frustration with the excessive decoration and stylistic complexities of later Qing furniture and an implicit awareness of the relevance of modernist principles to the reinterpretation of China's furniture heritage compatible with that of Western authors and collectors. *Ming shi jiaju yanjiu* also made an early attempt at setting out a taxonomic framework for Chinese furniture, labelling and assigning furniture pieces into varying categories with the creation of further stylistic subdivisions. These elements should be read within the framework of a wider cultural movement galvanised by political events taking place within China during the productive period of Yang's authorship which promoted the desire to establish, classify and crystallise an approach to China's heritage arts and the quest to establish a modernity that was unequivocally Chinese. The application of a classificatory system further introduced possibilities for the chronological ordering of furniture and the development of a coherent sequential and historical narrative. Referencing Melvin Alexenberg, (1976) the significance of a classificatory system is intrinsic to the the understanding and cognition of artworks:

The taxonomy can provide a framework for rethinking art education, for deriving an educational structure from the semiotic and spacio-temporal structure of art itself, and for making the entire human environment a work of art that can maximise opportunities for learning.⁴¹⁹

Little by way of documentary evidence exists to substantiate Yang's education or familial background. Information on Yang exists largely in the preface to the book of his collected essays on Chinese Ming-style furniture published posthumously by his student and protégé Chen Zengbi in 1986, eight years after Yang's death. Chen Zengbi studied architecture under Yang and would later assume the role of Professor of Architecture at the Academy of Fine Arts of Tsinghua University and publish his own research on Chinese historic furniture, including a number of short articles which were translated into English and included in the Journal of the Classical Chinese Furniture Society. Chen's preface to his publication of Yang's collected furniture essays, *Ming shi Jiajiu yanjiu*, states that Yang was

⁴¹⁹ Melvin L. Alexenberg. 1976. "A Semiotic Taxonomy of Contemporary Art Forms", *Studies in Art Education*, 1976, Vol. 17, No. 3 (1976), 7-12. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1320177>. Accessed 17.09.2022.

born in Beijing in 1902 into impecunious circumstances and notes that in 1932 he worked as an architect on the PUMC hospital building.⁴²⁰ From 1944 onwards, Yang was employed as Associate Professor in the School of Engineering of Peking University, where he taught classes and concurrently undertook architectural design tasks. As the first architecture courses in China were initially taught under Japanese-trained architects including Liu Dunzhen and Liu Shiying 柳士英 (1893-1973) in Suzhou and then in Nanjing, it seems reasonable to conclude that in the early stages of his career Yang probably learnt his trade as an architectural or engineering apprentice in Beijing.⁴²¹

Although the circumstances and tenure of Yang's employment at the PUMC are not known, the PUMC hospital constructed in Beijing in the 1920s by the American architect Harry Hussey (1882-1967) intentionally assimilated traditional Chinese building styles and techniques, even re-using some of the materials from ancient buildings demolished on the site of the hospital. (Figure 3.3) According to Hussey's own memoirs, designs for the PUMC buildings were favourably received by Zhu Qiqian who Hussey consulted on particular details such as glazed roof tiles.⁴²² The Rockefeller Board had articulated recognition of the need to sympathetically accommodate emblematic and prototypical Chinese design features in the PUMC's architectural strategy. Whilst the Foundation has since been criticised for an imputed expression of cultural paternalism intended to further the Foundation's objectives in China, it seems likely that this would have been a conducive atmosphere in which for Yang to consider the synthesis Chinese traditional architectural design principles within the context of modern western construction methods and materials.⁴²³

Yang's 1942 article commenced with an observation that the study of Chinese architecture was accelerating, thus necessitating an introduction to the traditional endemic decoration and furniture of the Ming dynasty. He also noted the relative dearth of textual

⁴²⁰ Yang, *Mingshi jiajiu yanjiu*, 13. Original text in Appendix 1. According to Chen, Yang and Ecke began working together during Ecke's tenure as Professor at Fu Jen University (founded in 1925 in Beijing) where Ecke was a member of the academic teaching staff after his return to Beijing from Paris in 1934.

⁴²¹ Ruan Xing, "Accidental Affinities: American Beaux-Arts in Twentieth-Century Chinese Architectural Education and Practice," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 61, no. 1 (March 2002): 30-47. <https://doi.org/10.2307/991810>. See also Li Shiqiao, "Reconstituting Chinese Building Tradition: The Yingzao fashi in the Early Twentieth Century," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 62, no. 4 (2003): 470-489. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3592498.pdf>

⁴²² Harry Hussey and V. K. Wellington Koo. 1968. *My Pleasures and Palaces: An Informal Memoir of Forty Years in Modern China*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday. 229.

⁴²³ Jeffrey W. Cody. *Building in China: Henry K. Murphy's "Adaptive Architecture," 1914-1935*. (Hong Kong, The Chinese University Press, 2002), 75. Cody provides an account of the Rockefeller Foundation Board's expectation that Republican Chinese politicians and intellectuals would move to enthusiastically accept Western science.

evidence afforded to the subject matter by authors from China's dynastic history, citing Ming imagery from woodcuts and painting as primary visual sources:

Decoration and furniture were seldom written about in dedicated studies in the past in China. Evidence for furniture comprises only a few fragments of text and illustrations. Fortunately, the paintings and wood block prints handed down from the Ming Dynasty leave us some opportunities to trace back the original furniture styles. With reference to archaeological discoveries, one is just able to find a few relevant traces.⁴²⁴

Yang's publication tended towards references from artworks and historical objects rather than written source material. He identified a particular Zhou dynasty bronze altar table as an archetype of the oldest archaeological evidence for furniture: "The bronze table (禁, *Jin*) from the Zhou Dynasty is the earliest archaeological evidence for furniture."⁴²⁵ Although the table is loosely described by Yang as "rectangular with a table top with frame brackets", a footnote to this comment in the text indicates that the table under discussion is the same as the Duanfang bronze altar table which was acquired for the MMA by John Ferguson in 1924 and which would be referenced two years later by Ecke in *Chinese Domestic Furniture*.⁴²⁶ Yang's footnote reveals his literary source as 枌禁の考古學的考察 *Fan jinno kaogu xue de kaocha* (Archaeological Studies on a Bronze Altar Table) written in 1933 by the well-known Japanese scholar Umehara Sueji 梅原末治 (1893-1983) who specialised in Japanese and Chinese bronzes.⁴²⁷ Umehara's familiarity with Duanfang's bronze altar table was well documented as he had spent time photographing the altar set after its accession to the MMA and it therefore seems logical to conclude it is the same table.⁴²⁸

Although Yang's article was the first study to make this connection in print, it is possible by this time that bronze altar tables were already conceptually established as the earliest extant antecedents for furniture, particularly in Chinese consciousness. Ecke's

⁴²⁴ Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 14. Original text in Appendix 1.

⁴²⁵ Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 18. Original text at Appendix 1.

⁴²⁶ Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 18. Original text in Appendix 1. The Duanfang bronze altar table is referenced in Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 4.

⁴²⁷ Umehara Sueji 梅原末治. *Henkin no Kokogakuteki Kosatsu 枌禁の考古學的考察* (Archaeological study of the bronze altar table). Kyoto: Toho Bunka Gakuin Kyoto Kenkyusho, 東方文化學院京都研究所研究報告 (The Academy of Oriental Culture, Kyoto Institute). facsimile 1933. 昭和59年 復刻版 (1984, reprint edition).

⁴²⁸ Li Chi. "The Tuan Fang Altar Set Reexamined." *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 3 (1970): 51-72.

Downloaded 26 May 2018 from <https://www.metmuseum.org/met-publications/the-tuan-fang-altar-set-reexamined-the-metropolitan-museum-journal-v-3-1970>

introductory remarks in *Chinese Domestic Furniture* regarding the relationship between architecture and furniture and the relevance of architectural symmetry and dissatisfaction with late carved and decorative furniture items are further points of commonality with Yang's 1942 publication. These ideas and connections, set out for the first time in Yang's essay, were iteratively expounded on in detail by Ecke with reference to art historical precedents from Chinese and other cultures. Relative timelines in production of the two publications become somewhat blurred when taking into account the dating of Yang Yao's drawings for *Chinese Domestic Furniture* which were executed between 1935 and 1943. According to Chen Zengbi, Yang had been engaged in researching Chinese furniture since the 1930s: "Yang Yao has been diligent in the anatomical research of Ming-style furniture throughout his life. As early as the 1930s, he personally produced a batch of precise and scientific Ming-style furniture structures and construction drawings on the basis of practice." The transmission of ideas between Yang and Ecke is clear from the written evidence: whether this was instigated by Ecke or comprised independent research by Yang is open to debate.⁴²⁹

Yang's 1942 article was accompanied by a number of small line drawings which could be reproduced cheaply and quickly on the university printing press, rather than the precise architectural line-drawings and costly photographic plates which accompanied Henri Vetch's upscale production of *Chinese Domestic Furniture*. Certainly the presentation of Yang's article on thin yellow paper contrasts starkly with the production of the first edition of Ecke's book, which was presented in a clothbound blue folding case with bone clasps in the style of traditional Chinese boxes made to house prized antique collectables. The soft cover of the small pamphlet in which Yang's article was printed stated that the publication was intended to mark the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Peking University's foundation, some thirty-seven years after the establishment of the Republic. As Timothy Weston has described, Peking University was established during the final decades of the Qing dynasty in 1896 as part of the drive to modernise education in China and to create a bridge between Chinese and Western methods of learning. The University's foundation was promoted by progressives such as Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873-1927), father of Liang Sicheng, and by scholars supportive of the need for intellectual and educational reform in China. It appears that the commencement of an art historical discourse on Chinese classical furniture was produced under the auspices of the University

⁴²⁹ Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 11-13. Original text in Appendix 1. In the opening paragraphs of the essay Yang refers to a sense of urgency in the preparation of the article which meant that materials had to be gathered together in haste.

apparently at the behest of the Dean of the School of Engineering where Yang was employed.⁴³⁰

Yang's small drawings of individual items of furniture are presented grouped together by type, with the somewhat questionable comment that "The furniture illustrations attached to this article are all made of *huanghuali*."⁴³¹ These small illustrations of individual furniture types are arranged, catalogue-style, into groups and represented as simple but carefully executed line drawings. The greater number of the items depicted by Yang are also recognisable in Ecke's book though in the majority of cases little indication of provenance is given. The division of furniture pieces by type, with further endeavour to arrange furniture examples by order of chronological relevance, reads as a first attempt at creating a classification system. This elementary taxonomy was similar to the approach employed by Ecke in *Chinese Domestic Furniture* though the categorisation is not identical.⁴³² Yang divided the pieces featured into seven categories (stool furniture, chair furniture with further subcategories illustrated and named as follows).

- 1.a. Stool furniture 机凳类家具 *wudeng lei jiaju*.
- 1.b Chair furniture 机椅类家具 *ji yi lei jiaju*
2. Tables - 几案类家具 *ji'an lei jiaju*
3. Cabinet furniture *chungui lei jiaju* 橱柜类家具.
4. Bed and couch furniture 床榻类家具 *chuang ta lei jiaju*.
5. Bookshelves and related furniture 书橱 类家具 *shuchu*
6. Stands and frame furniture 台架 类家具 *tai ja jiaju*.⁴³³

Ecke identified six classifications, including couches and beds; tables, seats (including stools); cases and cabinets; and stands and screens. A note in this section which may explain why Ecke did not follow Yang's approach to classification reads: "The Peking vernacular

⁴³⁰ See Timothy Weston. 2004. *Power of Position: Beijing University, Intellectuals, and Chinese Political Culture, 1898-1929*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California. 268.

⁴³¹ Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 28.

⁴³² Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 43.

⁴³³ Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 28-41. Original text in Appendix 1.

makes no consistent distinction of form and use.” Ecke’s six categories did not follow Yang’s logic, grouping chairs and stools together and establishing a further category for screens. Stool furniture was categorised separately from chair furniture by Yang in his diagrammatic study as the use of stool furniture is customary in Chinese culture. In addition, Ecke did not include footrests and names were typically anglicised rather than following the Beijing vernacular. For example, Ecke refers to a ‘lamp hanger’ chair (灯挂椅, *denggua yi*) as a ‘back chair’ rather than using the Beijing vernacular dismissed by Ecke, although this terminology, referenced by Wang Shixiang in *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, is in common use today.⁴³⁴

Yang’s labelled drawings are significant for their early attempt to encapsulate a basic lexicon of classical furniture types and to chart a rough timeline for stylistic development whilst assigning a rudimentary level of historical identification to different forms. Although the relative brevity of the article does not support a full analysis of different styles of furniture, it can be convincingly argued that this first study by a member of an academic faculty on classical Chinese furniture provides insight to contemporary knowledge and perspectives on the subject matter relevant to a number of concurrent dimensions. Also of interest are the relative disparities and points of coincidence between Yang’s *Zhongguo Mingdai shinei zhuangshi he jiaju* and *Chinese Domestic Furniture* which delineate the boundaries of knowledge on Chinese furniture prevailing among both Chinese and Western scholars in the 1940s in Beijing. According to the list of references Ecke provided in *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, the majority of his references and sources were from Western, rather than Chinese sources of information.⁴³⁵ On the assumption that much of Yang’s knowledge was acquired orally in the course of his collecting activities, it is likely that at least some of the information included in his short form publication was derived from antique dealers in Beijing.

An intrinsic focus of Yang’s commentary is the connection made in *Zhongguo Mingdai shinei zhuangshi he jiaju* between modernism and the appreciation of Ming style furniture. It is clear from Yang’s essay that Chinese architects were profoundly aware of the significance of Modernist tenets and sought to temper the encroaching prevalence of Western contemporary design on the built Chinese environment with architecture based on a vernacular vocabulary of design. Also in evidence is an understanding of how the

⁴³⁴ Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 43-44. Wang, *Connoisseurship*, 38.

⁴³⁵ In addition to referencing the advice of John Hope-Johnstone in determining the Chinese characters for furniture names, Ecke also referred to Hommell and Houghton as sources for information on Chinese wood types.

fundamental tenets of Ming style Chinese furniture and architecture resonated with Modernist schemata. This is most implicitly communicated in Yang's repeated censure of "clumsy" and florid manner of Qing furniture but is also conveyed directly in the five conditions listed as being compatible between modernism and Ming design: "function; beauty; durability; economy; hygiene [i.e., ease of maintenance]... only those meeting the above conditions can be regarded as modern."⁴³⁶ Further, Yang echoed the frustrations expressed by Liang Sicheng and the Society for Research in Chinese architecture regarding the focus on Western rather than Chinese design and the aim to promote modernism from within China:

The decoration and furniture of the Ming Dynasty was simple and elegant in style and followed logic in its approach to construction. If we want to further develop the heritage art forms of the East in architecture, we must not forget the merits of Ming Dynasty decoration and furniture... Recently, most people admire Western-style furniture and almost completely overthrow the original furniture styles and practices in our country. This is really a pity. I dare to say something boldly: "Modern things are not necessarily foreign products."⁴³⁷

Further expanding the contemporary scope of the study of Chinese furniture, Yang's 1942 publication made an early connection between literary and visual materials from the Ming and Song dynasties as supporting evidence for a study of the use of furniture from the Song dynasty onwards within a domestic setting. The book contained line drawings executed by Yang with the help of an associate from the School of Engineering, showing examples of interior scenes from Ming dynasty paintings to demonstrate how these items would have been situated within the Ming interior.⁴³⁸ Three of these illustrations depicted representations of interior scenes which were labelled by Yang as copies from a Ming *Baimei tu* 百美图 (One Hundred Beauties) painting series. Yang attributed these illustrations as copies from a facsimile of a Qing copy from a Ming original painting and cites the name of the publishing house. *Baimei* was a typical theme in Chinese art of the Ming and Qing dynasties represented in all mediums and in this case, the original Ming dynasty source for these three illustrations is not readily determinable. Yang might have gone further to note that illustrations and paintings of women, often pictured in domestic

⁴³⁶ Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 24. Original Chinese text at Appendix 1.

⁴³⁷ Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 24. Original text in Appendix 1.

⁴³⁸ Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 3. Original text in Appendix 1. Yang did not complete all of the sketches unaided and acknowledged the assistance of Feng Jiankui 馮建達 (n.d.) from Peking University's School of Engineering.

settings, in general provided ample visual research material for scholars of Chinese furniture from the Song dynasty onwards.

Beneath one of these illustrations of *baimei* interiors (Figure 3.4) is a reference to the *Yuan Ye*:

The wall-mounted bookcase in Figure 12 can be seen in the Ming wood engraved picture. It looks like a cabinet that is embedded in the wall. The panel door is built in four sections between upper and lower pivots. The style is both economical and beautiful, with railings placed outside the walls and windows, which is consistent with the designs shown in *Yuan Ye*.⁴³⁹

The reference to the *Yuan Ye* is notable here for its connection with Zhu Qiqian and the Society for Research in Chinese Architecture. Zhu's desire to promote ancient Chinese texts relevant to a wide range of cultural disciplines reflected a concern to protect and preserve the spirit and singularity of historic Chinese culture by cultivating knowledge of its creative endeavours through history. As noted earlier in this chapter, Zhu was pivotal in the rediscovery and editing of the *Yuan Ye* which had previously been a relatively obscure Ming text.

A fourth illustration is a representation derived from a painting by Ming artist Qiu Ying 仇英 (1494-1552), which Yang described as a depiction of Song dynasty furniture and interior decoration after the style of Song dynasty artist Li Gonglin 李公麟 (1049-1106).⁴⁴⁰ (Figure 3.5) Yang observed that Qiu Ying's paintings present a rich source of visual references for a study of Ming furniture. The image shown in Yang's book is identifiable as a drawing from a handscroll in a private collection with the figures removed, titled *Zhao Feiyan Waizhuan* 赵飞燕外传 (The Story of Zhao Feiyan's Life). The handscroll dates to 1540 and is attributed to Qiu Ying and Wen Zhengming 文徵明 (1470-1559), bearing colophons and seals from notable Qing dynasty collectors. The connection made between Qiu Ying's painting and Li Gonglin's style appears to relate to the inscription

⁴³⁹ Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 14-15. Original text in Appendix 1. Title translation for the *Yuan Ye* is from Alison Hardie's 1988 translation of Ji Cheng's work, *Ji Cheng*, Alison Hardie. 1988. *The Craft of Gardens*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.

⁴⁴⁰ Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 14, 24. Original text in Appendix 1.

in one of the attached colophons which could only be seen if the scroll was unfurled, perhaps suggesting that Yang had the opportunity to inspect the scroll in person.⁴⁴¹

In describing furniture for use in Ming-style sitting rooms, Yang noted the significance of the classical style of furniture arrangement, citing Tang poet Bai Juyi's 白居易 (772-846) eulogistic verse, *Lushan caotang ji* 庐山草堂记 (Story of the Thatched Cottage in the Lu Mountains) praising the elegance and simplicity of his retreat in the Lu Mountains. For collectors and students of Chinese furniture and architecture, these few lines describing Bai Juyi's mountain retreat illustrate the practicality, restraint and functional elegance to which the scholar literati and those that emulated their manner of living aspired.

Excerpt: The thatched cottage was complete. Three divisions by two columns, two rooms and four windows... open the door to the North to let the wind and sunshine in to prevent overheating in the summertime. My humble southern roof receives sunny days and prevents the cold. The wooden structure is cut by an axe. There is no additional cinnabar [referring to decorative red lacquered internal columns]; on the walls there is plaster over layers of mud with no additional whitewash. Stones are used to make the steps, paper is used to cover the windows, and the blinds are made of bamboo with Ramie [紵 nettle] curtains. Inside the main room there are wooden couches set up, four; two plain screens...⁴⁴²

The resonance with simplified modern architectural forms and emphasis on the union of form and function was not lost on Yang and will be discussed further in the next chapter. Yang compared the enduring relevance of couches in the thatched cottage with modern furniture types: "From the above prose, we can see how couches functioned in the living room at that time and what was needed. In functional purpose, it is similar to today's sofas."⁴⁴³

Several paragraphs of Yang's text are given to an analysis of materials used in the construction of classical Chinese furniture. Though these few brief passages do not provide sufficient depth of detail on the subject of materials, they give substance to the idea that luxury Ming furniture was not solely made of the more valuable hardwoods, chiefly

⁴³⁷ Qiu Ying and Wen Zhenming *Zhao Feiyan Waizhuan* 赵飞燕外传 (The Story of Zhao Feiyan's Life), 1540, Ink on thesis, approx. 30.5×1056 cm, Private Collection.
<http://www.cnarts.net/cweb%5Cnews/read.asp?id=366407&kind=%5Cu62cd%5Cu5356>.

⁴⁴² Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 22. Original Chinese text at Appendix 1.

⁴⁴³ Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 20. Original Chinese text at Appendix 1.

huanghuali and *zitan*, as later writers and accounts have suggested through their omission of a wider variety of materials. According to Yang's commentary:

The materials used in the furniture of the Ming Dynasty can be roughly divided into marble, lacquer inlaid with mother of pearl, carved lacquer, polished lacquer, *zitan*, *huanghuali*, *hongmu*, *jichimu*, cedar (*nanmu*), camphor wood, zelkova (南榆, *nanyu*; known as 榉木, *jumu*), boxwood, and so on.⁴⁴⁴

The first four materials in the list above were stated as being reserved for luxury items, whilst the remainder were employed for objects in everyday use and could be further divided into "hardwood and firewood (ordinary wood)" (硬木與柴木, *yingmu yu chaimu*).⁴⁴⁵ Of the hardwoods, *zitan* and *huanghuali* were described as first class (上品, *shangpin*), with *jichimu* ranked slightly lower, and other woods, including zelkova and *nanmu* considered to be ordinary.⁴⁴⁶ These statements are not attributed to any written source or prior authority and it seems likely that this represents a colloquial, orally disseminated view of Chinese furniture woods rather than the result of any formal or academic research or written antecedent source.

Yang authored a number of subsequent articles following the publication of his initial 1942 text on Ming furniture and interiors. A second article entitled *Ming shi jiaju yishu* 明式家具藝術 (The Art of Ming Furniture) was published in 1948 (original title: The Art of Folk Furniture of Our Country 我国民间的家具艺术, *Woguo minjian de jiaju yishu*). It reads as a continuation of the themes from the 1942 article and is perhaps most striking in its criticism of the stylistic degradation of Chinese furniture from the reign of Qianlong onwards, which he attributes to the diminishing contribution of the Ming scholar elite class and the ignoble tastes of the ruling classes from the time of Qianlong onwards.⁴⁴⁷ The spatial relationship between the body in architecture and furniture as a continuum are recurrent themes, as are the fluidity of line and strength and ingenuity of construction methodology without recourse to glue and nails which allows for both resilience and

⁴⁴⁴ Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 19. Original Chinese text at Appendix 1.

⁴⁴⁵ Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 19.

⁴⁴⁶ Yang Yao, *Zhongguo Mingdai shinei zhuangshi he jiaju*. In Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 19. Original text in Appendix 1. Dean Ruan Jiefan 阮介蕃 (n.d.) of the School of Engineering of Peking University and Director Zhu Zhaoxue 朱兆雪 (n.d.) of the Department of Architecture were singled out by Yang for their encouragement and assistance.

⁴⁴⁷ Yang, *Ming shi jiaju yishu*, 14. Original text in Appendix 1.

expansion in China's humid and fluctuating continental climate. Whereas has been described, Western scholars of Chinese furniture were concerned with locating the nexus of import for the development of Chinese seating furniture, particularly full height seated furniture, Yang contended that during the Yuan and Song dynasties, and again in the Ming, trade facilitated a cultural exchange such that Chinese furniture influenced the design of furniture elsewhere even from the earliest times.⁴⁴⁸

Yang's later articles were written at a time when the changing social and political landscape within China continued to precipitate a precarious state of affairs for scholars in China. The role and function of intellectuals in the propagation and politicisation of new concepts and ideologies has a long history in challenging the legitimacy of state norms both in China and more widely. From the late Qing era, radical ideas on modernisation and Western methods of learning disseminated by scholars such as Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868-1940) Tan Sitong 谭嗣同 (1865-1898) and Liang Qichao had instigated calls for reform resulting in political upheaval and ultimately, regime change in China. In the decades between the establishment of the PRC and economic reform and opening up in 1978, scholars and intellectuals were routinely oppressed and archival materials destroyed.⁴⁴⁹ The impact of this suppression on cultural research cannot be properly estimated but can reasonably be expected to have played a role in the delayed development of a Chinese historiography of furniture and other art forms.

Chen Zengbi's introduction to his publication of Yang's collected essays provides that "During the ten-year catastrophe, Mr. Yang Yao suffered undue impact and persecution, suffering serious physical and mental harm, and died in Beijing on August 21, 1978."⁴⁵⁰ The ten-year catastrophe (十年浩劫, *Shinian haojie*) refers to the Cultural Revolution and routine oppression of intellectuals and academics. Political pressure to write in a measured way may be evident in Yang's third article, first published in 1962, *Mingshi jiaju de yishu diwei he fengge* 明式家具的艺术地位和风格 (The Artistic Status and Style of Ming Furniture) commences with a contemporary justification of the benefits of a survey of historic furniture: "In the more than ten years after the liberation, my country's furniture industry has made great progress and achieved great results. In order to meet the needs of the working people, the

⁴⁴⁸ Yang, *Ming shi jiaju yishu*, 14. Original text in Appendix 1.

⁴⁴⁹ Chun-Chan Yeh gives an account of the role of scholars after the establishment of the PRC in 1949 and during the Cultural Revolution (1966 -1976). Yeh, Chun-Chan. "The Role of the Intellectual in China." *Third World Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (1989): 143-53. Accessed April 5, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3992746>.

⁴⁵⁰ Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 24. Original Chinese text at Appendix 1.

country has built a new batch of furniture factories, training a large number of skilled workers and furniture design resources.”⁴⁵¹

A further succinct article published a year later in 1963 completes Yang Yao's contribution to the historiography of Chinese Ming-style hardwood furniture. Chen Zengbi writes that the article was featured in *Jianzhu lilun ji lishi zilao huibian* 建筑理论及历史资料汇编 (Architectural Theory and Historical Record Collection).⁴⁵² The article describes an outline chronology of the stylistic development of Chinese furniture from the earliest dynasties to the Qing era. In a departure from Western writers such as Stone on the topic Yang offers a linear and elegant account of the chronological evolution of furniture in China, including the evolution of full height seated furniture. Rather than debate the nexus of foreign import for the use of full height seated furniture, Yang proposed that Buddhist customs depicted in the Dunhuang cave illustrations evidenced that the practice of higher-level seating was known among elite society in the Western Wei dynasty (535-557 CE). (Figure 3.6) By the time of the Tang and Song dynasties, the use of higher-level seating had spread to all social classes, though the practice of sitting on mats still remained, such that low- and higher-level seating and related furniture co-existed simultaneously.⁴⁵³

3. The Inception of furniture collecting in China: Chen Mengjia 陈梦家

From Yang's anterior publication in 1942, the development of a Chinese historiography on fine hardwood furniture from the Ming dynasty was further advanced by the contribution of two seminal actors. The collecting activity and promotion of Ming furniture by Chen Mengjia, an academic and authority on archaic Chinese bronzes and epigraphy, was catalytic to the later historiography on furniture authored by Wang Shixiang. Chen and Wang were born into respected, established families with a history of Qing officialdom and their intellectualised literati antecedents, Confucian education and study in the broader field of Chinese arts represent a significant contrast to Yang Yao. Chen's professional research interests and academic publications aligned with the traditional hierarchy of Chinese arts, encompassing philology, modern poetry and inscribed bronzeware from early dynasties. The significance of Chen's professional and scholarly research and literature is considered here with relevance to his furniture collecting.

⁴⁵¹ Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 25. Original text in Appendix 1.

⁴⁵² Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 1. There is seemingly no record of the original publication.

⁴⁵³ Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 5-6. Original text in Appendix 1.

The criticality of Chen's collecting activities to the historiographical development of the Chinese and Western literature on classical Chinese furniture is principally interconnected with his relationship with Wang Shixiang and his elevation of the status of furniture through the formation of his personal collection, which posthumously led to the establishment of the first public collection of hardwood furniture in China. Although his collecting activities provided significant impetus to the Chinese historiography on furniture, records of Chen's engagement in collecting are anecdotal and exist largely through colloquial and oral testimony. There is just one extant article, published in the JCCFS in 1991 and written by Wang Shixiang in an intimate and humorous style, which substantiates Chen's approach to furniture collecting with any level of granularity and detail.⁴⁵⁴ First-hand materials referencing his collection of Ming and Qing furniture principally draw from anecdotal sources including interviews with Chen's family members and associates. Commensurate with Western connoisseurs and historiographers of Chinese furniture, Chen's contribution to advancing knowledge on the subject was not connected with his professional academic work but with his personal collecting activity. The most significant points of reference for Chen's collecting activities exist in Wang Shixiang's books and in the furniture collection itself, now in the permanent collection of the Shanghai Museum where it is displayed with Wang Shixiang's furniture, and at the Huzhou City Museum in Zhejiang Province.

The articulation of an esteemed, ascribable category of 'classical' or 'Ming style' furniture should also be considered within the wider context of Chen's professional research focus on the documentation of Chinese art works in foreign public and private collections in America and Europe. Between 1945 and 1947 in addition to lecturing at the University of Chicago, Chen was engaged in extensively researching and photographing important Chinese bronzes in American collections.⁴⁵⁵ Time spent in Europe and America during the 1940s comprehensively surveying and cataloguing early Chinese bronzes in public and private collections may have had a significant impact on the direction of his collecting activities, demonstrating in real terms the significance placed on the acquisition, display and preservation of heritage objects. On the news of the establishment of the PRC, similar to other patriotic scholars studying abroad, Chen returned to China to participate in the founding of the new Republic. However, during Mao Zedong's short lived 'One Hundred

⁴⁵⁴ Wang Shixiang. "In Memory of Mengjia." *Journal of the Classical Chinese Furniture Society*, Vol. 1, No. 3, (Summer 1991): 57-59.

⁴⁵⁵ Edward Shaughnessy. *Chinese Annals in the Western Observatory*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501516948>. Shaughnessy provides an account of Chen Mengjia's activities in the US and his publications in English on bronzeware. 12, 178-9.

Flowers' campaign (百花齐放, *baihuaqifang*, 1956-1957), Chen openly critiqued the government's plan to institute a new system of written language.⁴⁵⁶ When the campaign came to an abrupt end, he was denounced as a 'Rightist' and, like many other scholars of the period, was sent to the Chinese provinces to be reformed. On his return to Beijing, he was subjected to public humiliation and died by suicide, cutting short his academic research career.

In concordance with the traditional hierarchy of Chinese arts in which the written word is pre-eminent, Chen's academic work and research focused on the development of Chinese script from the earliest records of the oracle bone inscriptions of the Shang Dynasty, through to cataloguing of inscriptions on bronze vessels of the early Zhou and Shang dynasties.⁴⁵⁷ An etymological and lexicological focus characterised Chen's research as Professor of Chinese at Tsinghua University, a post he held from 1937-1944.⁴⁵⁸ Chen's fascination with literary texts began in composing poetry. He became the youngest member of the Crescent Moon School (新月派, *Xinyue pai*) an avant-garde poetry group active in China between 1923-1934 which included a number of intellectuals who had studied outside China. Nicholas Tapp has described the group equivalent to the Bloomsbury set, comprising young and intellectual Chinese scholars seeking to perpetrate a uniquely Chinese answer to western Romanticism, drawing on the work of Blake, Byron and others to modernise the traditional Chinese literary genre. In her doctoral thesis on the Crescent Moon School, Xuecong Ma has argued that the School "understood modernity not as a negation of tradition, but as a critical synthesis and mutual conformity between the old and the new, the local and the global."⁴⁵⁹ It may be argued that the School's internationally aware and modernising principles cohere with the circumstances which made a revaluation of the significance of Chinese Ming furniture and its recent academic study relevant during the first half of the 20th century in China.

The significance of Chen Mengjia's study of Chinese bronzes in the US and Europe, funded by grants from the Rockefeller Foundation between 1944 and 1947 to the study and general estimation of Chinese furniture should not be underestimated. By the 1940s, some of

⁴⁵⁶ Shaughnessy, *Chinese Annals in the Western Observatory*, 412.

⁴⁵⁷ Nicholas Tapp. "Romanticism in China? -Its Implications for Minority Images and Aspirations". *Asian Studies Review*, 32:4, 2008, 457-474, 459-460. DOI: 10.1080/10357820802492206.

⁴⁵⁸ Feng Jixiao 方继孝. 2021. *Yinlu peiyang tixie de enshi - Chen Mengjia yu Wen Yiduo*. 引路 培养 提携的恩师—陈梦家与闻一多. (Mentors who have guided, nurtured and supported us - Chen Mengjia and Wen Yiduo). 2021-10-13. <https://www.tsinghua.org.cn/info/1952/36056.htm>. Accessed 12 January 2022.

⁴⁵⁹ Xuecong Ma. *Crescent Moon School: the poets, poetry, and poetics of a modern conservative intellectual group in Republican China*. Ph.D Diss., University of Edinburgh, 2016. 3. <http://hdl.handle.net/1842/25761>. Accessed 21.04.2022.

the museums where Chen studied bronzeware had already begun to display collections of Ming-style classical Chinese furniture. Elinor Pearlstein, formerly associate curator at the Chicago Museum of Art, has documented the visits made by Chen during his time in the US and in Europe.⁴⁶⁰ It is evident from Pearlstein's research that Chen spent time with prominent collectors, art dealers and curators of Chinese art on both sides of the Atlantic including Alan Priest, (1898-1969) Curator of Oriental Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and private collectors Alfred Pillsbury (1869-1950) and Avery Brundage (1887-1975). Notably, according to Pearlstein, Chen visited the NAMA in Kansas, meeting with Laurence Sickman and his assistant Lindsey Hughes Cooper (1908-1997) and spending time in most of the major museums in America which had gathered significant collections of Chinese art. By the mid to late 1940s these included Harvard's Fogg Museum, the MMA, the Chicago and Baltimore Museums of Art and the Royal Ontario Museum of Art in Toronto. Although by this period, public collections of Ming and early Qing furniture were still under-developed with most collections accumulated through gifts and acquisitions, Chen visited collectors in their homes and would have been aware of Chinese furniture in private collections and domestic American and European settings.

During Chen's sojourn in America three exhibitions of Chinese classical furniture were held in important state museums showcasing collections bought by former residents of Beijing who had returned to America. Between 1942-1946 the Kullgren collection of hardwood Ming-style furniture was displayed at LACMA. In 1946 the Brooklyn Museum exhibited George Kates' Chinese furniture in a show which received significant attention in the American press. Robert and William Drummond's collection of 34 furniture items, of which 25 were in *huanghuali* with the remainder in *zitan*, *hongmu* and *huamu*, was displayed at the Baltimore Museum of Art later the same year.⁴⁶¹ It is conceivable that Chen Mengjia may have had the opportunity to witness these exhibitions and that he would have been aware of them. In contrast, the history of Chinese-established museums on the Chinese mainland at this time was still a relatively short one, with the first attempt at establishing a museum having taken place in 1906 in Nantong, Jiangsu province.⁴⁶²

⁴⁶⁰ Elinor Pearlstein's Lecture at the Shanghai Museum of Art titled "Chen Mengjia: Chinese Bronzes, Western Collections, International Vision (Chen Mengjia and his exponents in the West)" delivered on 19 April 2019 provides an insightful reconciliation of Chen's movements at this time is apparently based on an unpublished manuscript. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4IMeAl4YPuk>.

⁴⁶¹ Jeanne Chapman (1993), "The Baltimore Museum's 1946 Exhibition of Chinese Furniture", *Journal of the Classical Chinese Furniture Society*; Summer 1993, Vol. 3 No. 3, 67-70. Pearlstein records that Chen visited Baltimore during his time in America. Pearlstein, "Chen Mengjia", at 49:27.

⁴⁶² Lisa Claypool (2005) "Zhang Jian and China's First Museum". *The Journal of Asian Studies*. Vol. 64, No. 3 (Aug. 2005), 567-604. 576.

The present Shanghai Museum, where Chen's furniture collection is now housed, opened in 1952. According to an account recorded in Hessler, Chen's correspondence with the curatorial staff substantiates his intention for the pieces in his collection to be gifted to the museum.⁴⁶³ Beyond the Palace Museum in Beijing, it cannot be stated with certainty how much furniture was on display in Chinese museums. However, it seems plausible that a linear connection existed between Chen's exposure to displays and exhibitions of Chinese furniture in Western museums and his intention to donate his collection of Ming furniture to the Shanghai Museum. According to Wang Shixiang, Chen began collecting furniture after his return from America in 1948.⁴⁶⁴ Several descriptions exist of the furniture collection in Chen Mengjia's own house being styled as if in a museum, with red ropes positioned across the seats to prevent sitting.⁴⁶⁵ Wang Shixiang wrote the following description of Chen Mengjia's collection on display in his home: "Mengjia was very serious. He blocked the seat with a red rope, and one was not allowed to touch, let alone sit. I once laughed at this as being 'more like a museum than a museum'".⁴⁶⁶ Accounts of Chen's collection suggest that in alignment with his own academic research, the collections on display in museums in mid-century China focused on collectable works of art that are awarded higher status in the traditional Chinese hierarchy of the arts, including archaeological discoveries of ancient bronzes, in particular those with engraved calligraphic and hieroglyphic inscriptions such as *kui* dragons and mythical zoological figures.

Records of Chen's collecting activity are scarce and must be pieced together from fragmentary anecdotes captured in interviews and personal accounts.⁴⁶⁷ Journalist Peter Hessler's investigative research included interviews with Chen's surviving family members and captured details relevant to Chen's collecting activity. His veneration of China's historic and cultural heritage, both linguistic or material, was recounted by his wife's family who described him as an acquisitive collector with more than twenty exemplary pieces of Ming style furniture. Zhao Luorui's 赵萝莉 (1912-1998) family recorded that after Chen's return to China in 1948 he and his wife used the greater part of their generous household income to fund their furniture collecting activities.⁴⁶⁸ From this it may be extrapolated that classical Ming style furniture was already admired and collected on the Chinese mainland and had

⁴⁶³ Peter Hessler. 2006. *Oracle Bones: A Journey Through Time in China*. New York: Harper. 384-385 and 532.

⁴⁶⁴ Wang Shixiang, "In Memory of Mengjia," 58.

⁴⁶⁵ Zheng Zong 郑重. 2008. *Shoucang Shisan Jia*. 收藏十三家 (Thirteen Collectors). Tianjin: Baihua Literature and Art Publishing House. 301.

⁴⁶⁶ Zheng, *Shoucang Shisan Jia*, 301. Original text in Appendix 1.

⁴⁶⁷ Zheng, *Shoucang Shisan Jia*, 227.

⁴⁶⁸ Zheng, *Shoucang Shisan Jia*, 228.

attracted some level of monetary value. Wang Shixiang has recorded that whilst Chen could afford to buy from expensive dealers on his salary from Tsinghua University, due to limited financial resources, Wang frequented night markets and poorer dwellings on his bicycle, purchasing items he found in use by the side of the road.⁴⁶⁹

An impression of Chen as a passionate collector of classical Chinese furniture can be formed from the anecdotal testimony of friends, family and academic colleagues. His significance to the study of indigenous furniture derives not from his written work but in his ability to edify a generation of scholars as to the perceived value and significance of this particular form of applied art.⁴⁷⁰ Whilst he did not directly augment the Chinese historiography on this subject, Chen's legacy to the preservation and art historicisation of classical furniture was actuated through his collecting activity, mentorship and personal relationship Wang Shixiang who would research and later publish arguably the most significant monographs on Chinese hardwood furniture. Wang is in turn recognised as perhaps the most significant Chinese writer and scholarly authority of any nationality on classical Chinese furniture.

4. The agency of nationalism: Wang Shixiang 王世襄

The penultimate section of this chapter critically examines Wang Shixiang's contribution to the historiography of Chinese furniture and the impact of his research on international collecting practices and later scholarship. Circumstantial similarities exist between Chen Mengjia and Wang Shixiang, and although Wang's background was more financially advantageous and connected with the arts, both spent time in America immediately before the establishment of the PRC, returning to support the political transition. A consideration of Wang's extensive art historical research and efforts to inculcate arcane Chinese cultural practices into societal esteem provides a basis for

⁴⁶⁹ Wang, "In Memory of Mengjia." 58.

⁴⁷⁰ The difficulties of art collecting in China between 1949-1976 are considered in Lu Di Yin's doctoral thesis, "Seizing Civilization: Antiquities in Shanghai's Custody, 1949 - 1996," PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 2012. Accessed March 15, 2021. <https://dash.lib.harvard.edu/handle/1/9547902?show=full>. An interview with Chen's academically trained wife Zhao Luorui, published in 1995, records that the collection was subject to theft and confiscation by Chinese authorities during the Cultural revolution, with an estimated 80% of Chen's furniture collection expropriated by the state and subsequently returned after 1976. See Kenneth Price. "An Interview with Zhao Luorui," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 13(1/2), 59-63. doi: <https://doi.org/10.13008/2153-3695.1480>. 59.

examining perceptions of furniture as a visual and cultural embodiment of Chinese ingenuity and accomplishment that can be read within a shifting coda of nationalism. Through a consideration of Wang Shixiang's background, antecedents and published works in the context of the prevailing political and social conditions in China, I demonstrate how Wang Shixiang's research and contribution to the written historiography was central to the international promulgation of knowledge, connoisseurship and appreciation of the subject of Chinese furniture in the final decades of the 20th century. Consideration of the collecting activity of Wang and Chen Mengjia precipitates a segue into the ultimate section of this study which addresses the collecting of Chinese furniture in the context of the written historiography.

This section begins with a consideration of the determinative elements of Wang Shixiang's early life and intellectual experiences giving rise to the personal accumulation of a postliminous cultural capital enabling his academic research and written work to transcend national and social boundaries and to acquire international relevance. Use of the term "cultural capital" here refers to the forms of social and economic capital conceptualised by Pierre Bourdieu in his essays "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction" (1977) and "The Forms of Capital" (1985).⁴⁷¹ Bourdieu extended Marx's theory of capital to include the "apprehension and possession of cultural goods as symbolic goods [which] are possible only for those who hold the code making it possible to decipher them."⁴⁷² These concepts are particularly relevant to the accumulation of art works and shared collecting activity between Wang Shixiang and Chen Mengjia. The establishment of Chinese furniture as an art field in the Bordieuian sense has particular relevance to the symbiosis between Wang Shixiang and Chen Mengjia's collecting activities and Wang's writing on Chinese furniture. Wang researched Chinese furniture over the course of more than four decades beginning from around 1943. The publication of his seminal works on Chinese furniture took place in 1985 and 1988. His early life and familial background is well documented in biographical and autobiographical texts both anecdotal and by academic writers including Craig Clunas.⁴⁷³ The objective in considering Wang's antecedents here is therefore not to recount an exhaustive personal history but to identify and examine illuminative catalytic factors operative on individual and broader social dimension relative to a focus on fine indigenous furniture as reflected in his collecting and writing activity. I also evaluate causative elements relevant to Wang's personal agency and the impact of his writing and collecting activity on

⁴⁷¹ Pierre Bourdieu, "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction" in *Power and Ideology in Education*. 1977. ed. J. Karabel, & A. H. Halsey. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁴⁷² Bourdieu, "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction," 488.

⁴⁷³ Craig Clunas, 'The Apollo Portrait: Wang Shixiang', *Apollo*, 127 (November 1987), 350-1.

the burgeoning international art trade in ‘Ming style’ hardwood furniture. A recrudescence in furniture collecting and trade occurred coetaneously with the publication of Wang’s writing on this topic and subsequent to a tumultuous period in China’s political history and eventual economic reform in the late 1970s.

Wang’s writing on classic Chinese furniture is considered with reference to his contribution to the literature on a polymathic range of cultural subject and object fields including furniture, paintings and traditional handcrafts and pastimes. Although Wang’s two seminal texts on furniture, *Classic Chinese Furniture: Ming and Qing Dynasties* (1985) and *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture* (1989) were published in both English and Chinese, the greater volume of Wang’s prolific written work, in particular relative to the fields of minor applied arts, remains untranslated from the original Chinese.⁴⁷⁴ The symbiosis between his extensive collecting activity and scholarship on Chinese furniture are considered in detail, supplemented by references to his articles and texts on other art forms. The structure and form of *Classic Chinese Furniture* and *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture* are evaluated with particular focus on Wang’s method of gathering evidence from oral testimony derived from craftsmen and antique dealers and his object-led research practices combined with references to historic primary texts relative to the production of furniture during the Ming dynasty and archival evidence for selection of cabinet woods. Comparison with international academic texts on Chinese furniture published during the same period, and a consideration of the development of the broader art historical field forms a basis for consideration of the relative merits of connoisseurship in perpetuating the focus on Ming and early Qing Chinese hardwood furniture.

Of the authors considered thus far, Wang Shixiang has arguably had the most significant impact on the advancement of Chinese furniture as an artistic accomplishment and cultural ‘field’ reflected in the maturation of collecting practices and perceptions of value across technical, artistic and taxonomic dimensions and disciplines. An evaluation of Wang Shixiang’s enrichment of the historiography of Chinese furniture in conjunction with his own collecting activity is foundational to the concluding chapter of this study on the development of international collecting practices within the field. In this respect, the application of relevant theoretical frameworks such as those provided by Pierre Bourdieu

⁴⁷⁴ For example, a number of Wang’s articles were published in *Wenwu* prior to the reestablishment of international relations with China in the 1970s. Many of Wang’s books on minor forms of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, such as Chinese pigeon whistles, as well as on books on his own collections are unpublished in English, for example Wang Shixiang 王世襄. 2007. *Jin hui bu cheng dui: Wang shi xiang zi xuan ji* 锦灰不成堆: 王世襄自选集, (*Brocade Ash Pile: Wang Shixiang’s series of collected essays*) Beijing: Sanlian Publishing Co., Ltd.

and Arjun Appadurai in their sociological discourses on cultural anthropology; globalisation (Appadurai); cultural capital, habitus and art fields (Bourdieu); and social aesthetics provide an apposite structural paradigm for analysis of Wang's historiographical contribution.⁴⁷⁵ The section concludes with a synoptic critique of the impact of Wang's writing on the Chinese historiography on Ming and Early Qing furniture which postdates his publications, in particular that of Wang's contemporaries, Zhu Jiajin 朱家潜 (1914-2003) and Hu Desheng 胡德生 (1949-2022) and his protégé, Tian Jiaqing 田家青 (1953-).

Wang Shixiang's antecedents and early cultural exposure

Wang's antecedents are not antithetical to those of the previous Chinese scholars considered thus far in this study. Consistent with other exponents of Chinese cultural heritage such as Zhu Qiqian and Liu Dunzhen, Wang was born into a scholarly family with important links to the Qing imperial court and a history of participation in government office. Despite these broader affinities, Wang's early years and familial background imparted cultural advantages distinguishing him from contemporaries on several accounts and with implications for his later role in the promotion of Chinese applied arts. His father Wang Jizheng 王继曾 (1882-n.d.) served as a diplomatic envoy in the Americas, exposing the young Wang Shixiang to international culture and languages from an early age.⁴⁷⁶ In addition, members of Wang's immediate and extended family were highly accomplished in a range of traditional Chinese arts and spent instructive periods outside China. Wang's mother, Jin Zhang 金章 (1884-1939) was a noted painter and one of few female Qing dynasty artists to receive training in Europe. His maternal uncle, Jin Xiya 金西厓 (1890-1979), was a celebrated bamboo carver who inspired Wang's appreciation of the handcraft and actively encouraged him to preserve and promote the practice of bamboo carving.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷⁵ Arjun Appadurai. 1986. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heh.06472>. Pierre Bourdieu. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Vol. 16). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 86. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812507>.

⁴⁷⁶ Wang Shixiang's biography provides details of his paternal family's prestigious antecedents which can be traced to the Ming dynasty. Details are given of the involvement in Qing officialdom from the Jiaqing period (1786-1820) onward and Wang's international education at an American School in Beijing. See Jianzhi Zhang 张建智. 2010. *Wang Shixiang Chuan* 王世襄传 (Biography of Wang Shixiang). Jiangsu: Jiangsu Literature and Art Publishing House. 18-20.

⁴⁷⁷ Zhang, *Wang Shixiang Chuan*, 22.

Evidence from Clunas and others suggests that in his early years Wang Shixiang was an indifferent scholar with a predilection for engaging in popular proletariat Chinese pastimes. Biographical commentary attests to Wang's enjoyment of traditional non-elitist activities such as badger hunting: Clunas has described Wang's fondness for amusements such as "cricket rearing and pigeon fancying."⁴⁷⁸ Regarded as plebian and prototypically Chinese in nature, these forms of entertainment were exterior to the range of occupations typically associated with Chinese literati such as practising calligraphy, seal carving and mastering the *qin*. Jin Zhang's death in 1939 prompted Wang to reevaluate his purpose and apply greater focus to his academic studies, combining an idiosyncratic range of personal interests with academic research foci. After completing a Master of Arts programme at Yenching University in 1941, he took up a position as Research Associate at the SRCA (1943-45) followed by bureaucratic posts recovering Chinese antiquities lost during the Sino-Japanese war which required the handling and restitution of antiquities and rare books.⁴⁷⁹ From 1947-1948, Wang served as a curator in the Palace Museum. Previous to this he held posts with the Beiping-Tianjin Regional Office of the Bureau for the Recovery of Cultural Relics Lost During the Sino-Japanese War and as a member of the Chinese Mission to Japan negotiating for the return of rare books removed by the Japanese during the war.⁴⁸⁰

A less well recognised aspect of Wang's early career is his presence on a taskforce convened by the Palace Museum in November 1954 alongside Chen Mengjia to identify, catalogue, name and conserve all furniture and woodware items in the museum's collection.⁴⁸¹ Four taskforces were established, assessing items manufactured in wood; textiles; porcelain and imperial works of art. Wang was assigned to become a member of the woodware taskforce which was led by Chen Mengjia and Ouyang Daoda 欧阳道达 (1893-1976) director of the archives of the Palace Museum, as the conveners, and the carpenter Zu Lianpeng 祖连朋 (n.d.) and Wang Shixiang as members.⁴⁸² Together with Wang's work at the SRCA and under the tutelage of Zhu Qiqian, an active proponent of the preservation of

⁴⁷⁸ Clunas, "The Apollo Portrait", 351. See also Zhang, *Wang Shixiang Chuan*, 44.

⁴⁷⁹ A descriptive record of Wang Shixiang's career and professional experiences can be found in several chapters of a recent publication by Fang Jixiao based on correspondence and interviews with Wang Shixiang. Fang Jixiao 方继孝. 2021. *Chen Mengjia he ta de pengyoumen* 陈梦家和他的朋友 (Chen Mengjia and his friends). Hong Kong, Xinzhi Sanlian Bookstore Co., Ltd. In addition, a concise record of Wang Shixiang's administrative positions with dates is provided in *Classic Chinese Furniture*. 324.

⁴⁸⁰ See Fang Jixiao. *Chen Mengjia he ta de pengyoumen*. 320

⁴⁸¹ Fang, *Chen Mengjia he ta de pengyoumen*, 44. Fang states that records of the taskforces were found in the furniture archives of the Palace Museum.

⁴⁸² Fang, *Chen Mengjia he ta de pengyoumen*, 46. Zu Lianpeng is described as "A well-known old craftsman who restores hongmu furniture... with superb craftsmanship and a meticulous approach to restoring furniture". Zu's importance to Wang's scholarship and collecting activities is such that he was referenced as a collaborator throughout Wang's writing on furniture.

early craftsman's classics and technical manuals, these formative professional and theoretical experiences combined to promote a focus in Wang's research on early methods, techniques and circumstances for the production of cultural artefacts. Wang has specifically attributed the origination of his interest in historic furniture and "non-structural carpentry and joinery" to his position at the SRCA and in particular to the study of the Song dynasty *Yingzao fashi* and the "Qing dynasty artisans' standards."⁴⁸³

Wang's capacity to straddle international and domestic cultural fora by virtue of lineage and favourable familial background circumstances, was a determinant factor in his later ability to consolidate international and domestic appreciation for Chinese classic furniture through collecting and research.⁴⁸⁴ His promotion of the broader litany of fine and applied Chinese arts as well as forms of intangible cultural heritage was also critical in the coagulation of a wider movement to conserve artefacts and techniques derived from fields of production which were traditionally considered less prestigious. Wang's approbation and intellectualisation of furniture through cross disciplinary research was pivotal in elevating the status of indigenous furniture within China, building on the work that Ecke and Kates' publications in America. In addition, his written historiography of Chinese classical furniture in the 1980s resulted in an increased circulation of furniture pieces and enhanced collecting practices by differentiating between quality of craftsmanship and defining desirable attributes of individual pieces as well as increasing the circulation of knowledge and historical understanding on the subject. As Wang himself commented with perhaps some regret, his texts on Chinese furniture impacted the outward international flow of furniture objects from the Chinese mainland.

An innate ability to remain socially mobile within this dynamic period in Chinese politics in which traditional class systems and hierarchies were reconstructed and rebuilt was fundamental to Wang's ability to contribute to the preservation of China's cultural past and enabled access to historic furniture items previously hidden from view. Whilst navigating social and class divides within China, Wang was able to access furniture items in indigent working-class homes and to later promote Chinese furniture to an elite international group of private collectors and museum curators. International commutability afforded by social and educational circumstances and experiential training in handling and selecting antiques

⁴⁸³ The "Qing dynasty artisan's standards" referenced by Wang in his introduction to a publication celebrating the installation of his collection at the Shanghai Museum is assumed to refer to Liang Sicheng's 1934 publication *Qing Structural Regulations* 清式营造则, based on the 1734 text of *Qing gongcheng zuofa zeli* 清工程做法则例 (Qing Architectural Code) See Quincy Chuang, ed. 1998. *The Chuang Family Bequest of Fine Ming and Qing Furniture in the Shanghai Museum*. Hong Kong: The Woods Publishing Company. 13.

⁴⁸⁴ Craig Clunas, "The Apollo Portrait: Wang Shixiang," 351.

initially in government office and later at the Palace Museum provided a unique platform from which to advocate for the significance of Chinese craft as a vessel for cultural heritage and source of national esteem. Between 1945-47, Wang was employed by the Bureau for the Recovery of Items Lost during the second Sino-Japanese War under the Ministry of Education and formed part of a delegation to Japan whose remit was to recover rare Chinese books. Between 1947-1948 and 1949-1953 Wang assumed the post of Curator in the Department of Antiquities at the Palace Museum in Beijing. From 1953 until retirement, he held research posts in various government cultural departments including the Institute of Music (1953-1962); Institute of Research on Cultural Relics and Museums and Research institute for the Conservation of Cultural Property (1962-1980).⁴⁸⁵ The combination of Wang's literati background and education in the classical Chinese texts complemented by his ability to commute between craftspeople, museum staff, bureaucrats, and affluent Western art dealers and collectors as well as proletariat Chinese underpinned his ability to protect, promote and perpetuate Chinese art, in particular Chinese Ming and early Qing furniture.

Wang Shixiang's time in America and return to China (1948-1949)

A perceptible sense of moral imperative in preserving China's cultural heritage serves as a consistent thread which runs throughout Wang's writing across divergent cultural fields and accords with a broader language of nationalistic sentiment articulated by returning academics to China at this time. Immediately prior to the establishment of the PRC Wang spent a year in America, sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation. Declining the opportunity of a further grant to extend his period of research in America, Clunas writes that Wang "returned home like a true patriot" to participate in the founding of the new People's Republic.⁴⁸⁶ A conscientious and allegiant proclivity for active engagement in the founding of the Republic is a sentiment repeatedly echoed by scholars who had been abroad prior to the formation of the new Republic, in particular where family connections to government existed via engagement in former imperial officialdom. Scholars returning from the West to China were frequently motivated by a lineal history of officialdom and a connate sense of duty towards the administration of the new state. A neo-Confucian logic of public morality may also have contributed to the desire for scholars to play a role in the establishment of the

⁴⁸⁵ Wang, *Classic Chinese Furniture*, 324.

⁴⁸⁶ Clunas, *The Apollo Portrait*, 351.

new People's Republic. This ideology has its genesis in the philosophically viscous concept of Chinese Nationalism perpetuated by Liang Qichao and others in the early decades of the twentieth century pursuant to the end of the Qing dynasty and conflict with the Japanese, which transmogrified relative to the vicissitudes of political ideology in China during the first half of the twentieth century.⁴⁸⁷

Establishing the new Chinese state required both the participation of its citizens and the definition of a national cultural identity. Both of these catalytic dimensions are visible in the intellection of Wang's discourse on Chinese furniture and other cultural artefacts. Nationalist and patriotic associations can be readily identified in Wang's writing in relation to Chinese furniture as well as the broader litany of Chinese craft objects. Perhaps most apposite to this theme of burgeoning nationalistic pride in China's cultural heritage among Wang's written works is "An Appeal to Save Classical Furniture" published in 1957 in *Wenwu* in Chinese and reprinted in English in *The Journal of Classical Chinese Furniture* in 1991 in which Wang proposed that furniture pieces of "superb artistry" should be placed in Chinese embassies abroad, particularly "in those departments that often receive foreign guests."⁴⁸⁸ Whereas the focus of the article was the preservation of historic furniture, the exigency of its preservation was argued with relevance to indigenous heritage and national pride: "When you pay attention to new furniture, you must also consider ancient furniture, because it is the crystallisation of our ancestors' wisdom and our cultural heritage."⁴⁸⁹

Although Wang Shixiang and Chen Mengjia did not develop a close professional and personal relationship until their return from the United States in 1949, like Chen, Wang also spent his time in America from 1948-1949 surveying major public collections of Chinese art.⁴⁹⁰ Alfred Gell has characterised objects displaced by their absorption into alien (or "other") cultures through collecting or other means as "a corpus of artworks as a kind of spatiotemporally dispersed 'population' ... [which] have to do with the extension of

⁴⁸⁷ See Zheng Dahu, "Modern Chinese nationalism and the awakening of self-consciousness of the Chinese Nation", *International Journal of Anthropology and Ethnology*, 3, 11 (2019). Accessed 3 March 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41257-019-0026-6>; and Edward Friedman, "Reconstructing China's national identity: A southern alternative to Mao-era anti-imperialist nationalism", *Journal of Asian Studies*, 53 (1), (1994): 67. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/reconstructing-chinas-national-identity-southern/docview/1290467116/se-2?accountid=14540>

⁴⁸⁸ Excerpted from an article written by Wang in 1957, published in *Wenwu cankao ziliao* (no.6, 1957, 64-65), "An Appeal to Save Classical Chinese Furniture." Republished in English with translation by Tan Tang Kao in *The Journal of Classical Chinese Furniture*, Autumn 1991, Vol 1 No. 4, 38-40. Quotation from the English publication.

⁴⁸⁹ Wang Shixiang, 1957. *Huyu qiangjiu gudai jiaju* 呼吁抢救古代家具 (An Appeal to Save Classical Chinese Furniture), quotation from the original publication in *Wenwu Cankao Ziliao*, No. 6, 1957, 64-65. Original text at Appendix 1.

⁴⁹⁰ Wang, "In Memory of Mengjia", 58.

personhood beyond the confines of biological life via indexes distributed in the milieu.”⁴⁹¹ Wang was consistent in demonstrating his intention to record, conserve and amplify a Chinese ethnographical cultural identity and heritage and examples of his written work indicate a desire to contain the outward dispersal of cultural artefacts. Writing in *The Global Lives of Things*, Paula Findlen has remarked that “Each exchange becomes an opportunity to observe how things metamorphose from one society to another.”⁴⁹² Findlen considers that as objects traverse “nodes” in an increasingly complex globalised landscape of interconnected networks, they acquire layers of meaning informed and interpreted in different ways through synthesised economic, cultural, consumptive realities.⁴⁹³ In this instance, the spectacle of objects from one culture, legitimised, valorised and commodified by another within the context of a hegemonic power structure may have had different connotations in the mid-twentieth century to those that exist today. As Jürgen Habermas has observed, a nation state in formation, as China was in the 1940s, brings a dialogical complexity to the concept of national identity and requirement for recognition, particularly in the case of marginalised groups.⁴⁹⁴

Two further articles published by Wang and Chen Mengjia in 1950 in *Wenwu* on painting and bronze are relevant in this context by reference to their titles rather than their contents. An article by Wang Shixiang entitled *Ji meidi suojuqu de zhongguo minghua* 记美帝所攫取的中国名画 (Remembering the Chinese Paintings Seized by the American Empire) addressed the foundational circumstances and merits of public American collections of Chinese painting although it did not express further the specific critiques suggested by the title. A similarly named article written by Chen Mengjia consistent with the theme of Chinese objects in American collections was published on consecutive pages in the same edition of *Wenwu*: *Zhongguo gudai tongqi zenyang dao meiguo qu* 中国古代铜器怎样到美国去? (How did ancient Chinese bronzes get to America?) The use of incendiary titles in Chinese state publications during this period perhaps better reflected the political *esprit de corps* in China at this time rather than the intentions of the author but are indicative of a

⁴⁹¹ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 221-223.

⁴⁹² Paula Findlen. “Afterword: How Early Modern Things Travel,” in Paula Findlen, ed. 2021. *Early Modern Things: Objects and their Histories, 1500-1800*. 2nd ed. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group. doi:10.4324/9781351055741.244.

⁴⁹³ Findlen 244-245.

⁴⁹⁴ Jürgen Habermas. 1994. “Struggles for Recognition in the Democratic Constitutional State.” In *Multiculturalism*. Ed. Charles Taylor, 107-148. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 113.

recurrent nationalist sentiment and preoccupation with the possession of Chinese cultural heritage and art works by international communities.⁴⁹⁵

In this respect, Wang's writing represents an ideological continuum of the earlier publications and aspirations of Zhu Qiqian and the Society for Research in Chinese Architecture. Zhu had rediscovered the Ming lacquer craftsman's text, *Xiushilu* 髹饰录 (Record of Lacquer Decoration), originally compiled during the mid-Ming reign of Emperor Longqing (r.1567-1572) by lacquer master, Huang Cheng 黄成 (n.d.) with preface dated 1625 by lacquer master Yang Ming 杨明 (n.d.) from Jiaxing.⁴⁹⁶ Zhu's block prints of the publication were lost during the Second Sino-Japanese War and he encouraged Wang to produce a revised and annotated version from one of the few remaining copies of his earlier publication in order that the text could be reprinted and thus be preserved for wider circulation. Originally produced in the Ming dynasty for a literary audience to better understand the techniques behind lacquer decoration and techniques and the variety and chronology of stylistic development, the *Xiushilu* was considered to have been lost in the Qing dynasty until Zhu propitiously obtained a partially complete copy from a collection in Japan. Wang notes that the *Xiulishu* was not written in craftsman's language but was intentionally prosaic and intended to appeal to a literary audience.

Zhu's appreciation of historic craftsman's classics and preservation of rare texts documenting specialist methods of production appears to have invigorated Wang whose own annotated publication of the *Xiushilu* included the following passage:

If you read the "Record of Lacquer Decoration" again, you will find that what is displayed in general museums and exhibitions is only a small part of the traditional variations of decorative lacquerware. This imparts greater awareness of how rich and colourful our country's traditional lacquerware is! The diligent wisdom of the previous generation of craftsmen created spiritual and material wealth, added beauty to life, and made contributions to mankind. One cannot help but respond to this lesson in nationalism with patriotic pride.⁴⁹⁷

⁴⁹⁵ Both articles appeared in the same issue of *Wenwu* (文物) No. 11 (1950): 64-87 (Wang) and 87-91 (Chen).

⁴⁹⁶ Ulrike Körber, Michael R. Schilling, Christine Barrocas Dias, and Luis Dias, "Simplified Chinese Lacquer Techniques and Nanban Style Decoration on Luso-Asian Objects," *Studies in Conservation* 61, sup 3 (2016): 68-84. Accessed 31 March 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393630.2016.1227052>.

⁴⁹⁷ Wang Shixiang. 1998. *Xiushilu jieshuo: Zhongguo chuanguotong qi gongyi yanjiu* 髹饰录解说：中国传统漆工艺研究 (Commentary on the Record of Lacquer Decoration: Research on Traditional Chinese Lacquer Crafts). Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe. 7-9. Original text in Appendix 1.

Similar though more direct sentiments were expressed in “An Appeal to Save Classical Furniture”, which presented an impassioned plea for the preservation and retention within China of historic furniture:

It is no coincidence that people are so interested in classical Chinese furniture... We should be proud of the high level of craftsmanship and artistry that our ancestors attained. ... Thus, classical Chinese furniture is considered an important cultural treasure all over the world. But what of ourselves?... For a long period, we made no effort to protect it, collect it or study it. Indeed, we sell our furniture to foreign buyers, or dismantle it, or destroy it.⁴⁹⁸

Christopher Wood has theorised that “Much art is a mode of political expression, taking the shape of indignant protest or exposure of hidden inequities.”⁴⁹⁹ Although relating *prima facie* to the production of art works, Wood’s statement is relevant to the reception, selection and intrinsic value placed on art within societies including where the selection of art and its acculturation or assimilation into a politically dominant context. Wang’s later close associations with international art collectors and scholars indicate that these passages should be interpreted as resonant of regret rather than umbrage. It may be argued with greater certainty that the time Wang and Chen Mengjia spent in the West had caused both to be deeply cognisant of the value placed on Chinese fine and applied arts by their accumulation and display in American and European collections. Conclusions may be drawn relative to the formation of national identity and the necessity to preserve in China evidence of cultural achievement and identity, in particular relevant to the period during the mid-century which framed the original publication of Wang’s article in *Wenwu*.

It is clear from Wang’s writing that he was familiar with earlier Western publications on Chinese furniture which were deficient in the application of primary source materials and in their understanding of the facts of furniture production, including identification of materials. As has been noted, furniture examples represented by Ecke in *Chinese Domestic Furniture* focused principally on pieces in *huanghuali*. Wang challenged some of the material designations made in *Chinese Domestic Furniture*. In *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, Wang critiqued a number of Ecke’s claims on furniture in his possession,

⁴⁹⁸ Wang Shixiang “An Appeal to Save Classic Furniture,” *The Journal of Classical Chinese Furniture*, Autumn 1991, Vol 1 No. 4. 38. The article is a translation of Wang’s 1957 article, published in *Wenwu cankao ziliao* (no. 6, 1957 64-65).

⁴⁹⁹ Christopher S. Wood. 2019. *A History of Art History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2708126>. 392.

including a statement that a *kang* table in the collection of German art dealer Otto Burchard (1892-1965) was made of *huanghuali*, noting that the piece, with which Wang was evidently familiar, was probably constructed in *hongmu*, a considerably less valuable cabinet wood. Wang noted that Kates had also illustrated this same piece in *Chinese Household Furniture* and had correctly identified the wood as being *hongmu*.⁵⁰⁰ In “An appeal to save Classical Chinese Furniture”, Wang wrote: “In his book, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, the German professor Gustav Ecke included 122 photographs of classical furniture, most of which had also been transported to the West.”⁵⁰¹

5. Two seminal texts on classical Chinese furniture

Wang’s two major books on Chinese furniture, *Classic Chinese Furniture - Ming and Qing Early Dynasties* and *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture - Ming and Early Qing Dynasties*, published four years later in 1989, represent arguably the most important texts on Chinese furniture due to their practical implication for aggregating knowledge from various sources and their resultant impact on the commercial processes supporting the practice of collecting Chinese furniture.⁵⁰² Both reflect Wang’s characteristic non-discriminatory, multidisciplinary research methodology and resulted from extensive empirical and object-based study. Wang’s approach combined interviews in the field with archival analysis of primary source material relevant to furniture and its production in the Ming and early Qing era and as I describe below, included a number of sources which had not previously been identified for association with furniture production.

Connoisseurship and *Classic Chinese Furniture* have a non-linear production timeline and significant overlap in key themes with primary source materials often repeated in both books. *Connoisseurship* represents the culmination of Wang’s extensive body of research on Chinese furniture. The manuscript was completed in 1982 with much of the contents based on the contents of a course Wang taught on Chinese furniture at the Central Academy of Decorative Arts in 1961.⁵⁰³ Its publication was delayed by a request from the Joint Publishing Company in Hong Kong for a shorter illustrated book on the subject

⁵⁰⁰ Wang, *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, 166.

⁵⁰¹ Wang Shixiang, “An Appeal to Save Classical Furniture.” *Journal of the Classical Chinese Furniture Society* 1:4 (Autumn 1991). 38-40.

⁵⁰² *Classic Chinese Furniture- Ming and Early Qing Dynasties* was first published in 1985 in Chinese in Hong Kong and Beijing under the title 《明式家具珍赏》 *Ming shi jiaju zhen shang* [Ming Furniture Treasures] by the Joint Publishing Company (Hong Kong) and Cultural Relics Publishing House, Beijing.

⁵⁰³ Wang, *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, 205.

resulting in the 1985 publication of *Classic Chinese Furniture* which represents an abridgement drawn from the original manuscript for *Connoisseurship* and the culmination of Wang's decades of personal research, with the full script published in 1989.⁵⁰⁴ There is similar duality between many of the furniture pieces photographed and documented for publication in *Classic Chinese Furniture*, of which 136 of a total of 175 are included in *Connoisseurship*. In view of the intersection and extensive overlap between the two publications, *Connoisseurship* and *Classic Chinese Furniture* are evaluated here synchronously. Analysis of the historiographical significance of *Classic Chinese Furniture* and *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture* should be approached from a multi-disciplinary perspective to gauge their significance relative to the understanding and comprehension of Chinese furniture and the escalating focus and attention on Chinese furniture collecting.

Classic Chinese Furniture took the form of a single volume with a concise summary introduction to the historical developments and sociopolitical and economic circumstances giving rise to the exponential increase in production of fine hardwood furniture in the Ming and early Qing dynasties. *Classic Chinese Furniture* largely subscribed to the catalogue format of earlier Western publications on Chinese furniture with the greater proportion of the book given to photographs of representative pieces from private and public Chinese collections. Published four years later, *Connoisseurship* extrapolated this breviloquent discourse, expanding on many of the themes addressed summarily in *Classical Furniture*. The more ambitious scope of *Connoisseurship* is presented in two volumes with the first an encyclopaedic volume analysing historical development; form; construction; decoration and use of materials and the second volume comprising 361 extant examples subdivided into the following categories by function.

Functional category	Number of pieces
A. Stools and Chairs	100
B. Tables	139
C. Beds and Couches	21
D. Cabinets and stands with shelves	46
E. Miscellaneous	53

⁵⁰⁴ Wang, *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, 205.

Classic Chinese Furniture and *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture* should be read within the context of Wang's broader written work on diverse forms of Chinese art, as well as his early association with Zhu Qiqian and his work at the Palace Museum and SRCA. Wang's writing on Chinese furniture evidences a Western-derived art historical approach of situating objects within the context of contemporary cultural and socio-economic phenomena supported by archival documentation. Jules David Prown has characterised the divergence between the study of material culture and art history, observing that the Western history of art is traditionally concerned with "questions of stylistic and iconographic influence, of dating and authorship, of quality and authenticity," indicative of an overarching concern with situating objects within the cultural context of its circumstance and period of production.⁵⁰⁵ He asserts that an evolved art historical discipline blends anthropology, sociology, politics and economics to arrive at a projected definition of meaning and essence against the object is reified as possessive of an extended significance.⁵⁰⁶ Commenting on the distinction between Chinese and Western approaches to art historical analysis, Wu Hung writes that the traditional Chinese discourse on art is concerned with antiquarianism and the concept of *fugu*, and ideology which broadly translates as "returning to antiquity" and carries political significance in attempting to connect the present with the past, implying legitimacy, consistency and authority.⁵⁰⁷

Recognising Wang's internationalised academic approach, the primary element distinguishing his seminal texts from the works of other writers such as Clunas is the integration and documentation of critical first-hand testimony from Beijing craftsmen in addition to Wang's own extensive object-based technical research and personalised narrative of his discovery of specimen items. Wang's multidisciplinary research methods are described extensively in *Connoisseurship*. Although reference is made to historic technical manuals, primarily the *Lu Ban Jing*, this approach was distinctive in prioritising observational and object-based research methods.⁵⁰⁸ In addition to his identification of primary Ming texts relating to furniture production and consumption, the greater part of

⁵⁰⁵ Jules David Prown. "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method." *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1 (1982): 1-19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1180761>. 7. Accessed 31.08.2024.

⁵⁰⁶ Prown. "Mind in Matter," 10-11.

⁵⁰⁷ Wu Hung. 2022. *Chinese Art and Dynastic Time*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. 203-205, 218.

⁵⁰⁸ Zhu Jiajin wrote in the Preface to *Connoisseurship*, "The author... studies old texts, such as *Lu Ban's Classic*... [and] also took the sections on interiors and furniture from more than 70 books on Qing dynasty regulation (*Zeli* 則例)." Wang, *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, 10.

Wang's seminal contribution to the historiography of Chinese furniture was gathered in the course of physical handling, collecting, restoring and deconstructing furniture items to facilitate comprehension and diagrammatic representation of joinery and carpentry techniques.

Field research in the provinces attempted to establish a regional vocabulary of Chinese furniture which had not been previously undertaken for which observational visits to Chinese provinces which had been centres of manufacturing were required. The object of these surveys was to seek to decode a regional basis on which the origins of furniture pieces could be understood.⁵⁰⁹ As described in detail below, Wang also provided evidence for the estimation in which the principal wood types were used during the period of production with reference to extensive primary source material substantiating assertions relative to cultural and market value. On matters relevant to the classification, onomastics and nomenclature of furniture styles and construction techniques, Wang assigned equal significance to the testimony and terminology of Beijing craftsmen working in the *Lubanguan* as he did to citations from historic and imperial and literary archival sources such as the Qing dynasty *Zeli* 則例 and the Ming *San Cai Tu Hui*.⁵¹⁰ In addition to archival research, esteem for the evidential testimony and oral evidence gathered from Beijing cabinetmakers also distinguished Wang from Western writers whose access to oral testimony would have been limited to collectors from Qing scholarly families and dealers from Beijing's *Liulichang* antiques district. Sarah Jones and Roger Woods have commented on the "primacy of individual experience" which characterises oral testimony as a significant element in the personalisation of historical narrative which elevates and validates collective historical record; noting that personalisation brings opportunity to record information which may otherwise be lost but also the risk of fissure and fabrication.⁵¹¹

The artist Zhu Jiajin's 朱家潛 (1914-2003) introductory comments noted "Shixiang values the terms preserved in the language of the cabinet-makers [sic] who were his living sources. He had many good friends among the cabinet-makers of *Lubanguan*."⁵¹² Wang described the *Lubanguan* as "the antique furniture street in Beijing" referring to the *hutong* in Beijing where many furniture restorers and antique dealers were based, of which there is

⁵⁰⁹ Wang, *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, 19-24.

⁵¹⁰ Wang, *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, 37, 43 and 50.

⁵¹¹ Sarah Jones and Roger Woods. 2023. "Introduction: Testimony of Culture and Cultures of Testimony" 3. In: Jones, S., Woods, R. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Testimony and Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. Accessed 21 May 2022. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13794-5_1

⁵¹² Wang, *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, 10.

evidently no English language or accessible academic record.⁵¹³ Colloquial and anecdotal sources describe it as being a mile long and in Beijing's Dongcheng district and demolished in the late 1950s to make way for newer buildings. It was named for the Luban temple which existed in the hutong, named for the same deity that created the *Lu Ban Jing*. This diacritical and inclusive approach to research is particularly evident in the chapter in *Connoisseurship* addressing "The Types and Forms of Furniture." This chapter, which coagulates primary and secondary source material gathered in the course of Wang's research during the preceding four decades, enumerated a revised and comprehensive taxonomy of furniture, and is arguably the most fundamental element of Wang's contribution to the historiography on Chinese furniture due to its practicable impact on the identification, gathering and collecting of furniture. Wang referenced information shared colloquially, for example to explicate the naming of so-called "lamp-hanger" chairs and the testimony of various named craftsmen.⁵¹⁴

Wang's categorisation of furniture types far exceeded the research published by earlier writers in defining, labelling and standardising specific technical and design characteristics of the principal furniture types. Exemplifying this observational and precise style, Wang examined both the origins and form of chairs with four splayed legs *cejaio* 侧脚 (literally 'side foot') which he identified as a structural motif derived from Chinese architecture. He discussed the legs being set in and splayed out towards the end, a design element which he noted is termed *shao* 梢 in the *Lu Ban Jing* (translating as 'tip', for example the narrow end of branch) but *zha* 挖 (meaning to open out or expand) by modern craftsmen in Beijing.⁵¹⁵ The expansive and detailed approach to the naming and description of constructional and stylistic furniture types in *Connoisseurship* in both textual and diagrammatic form was instructive and instrumental to the dealer-runner system which operated in China at and around the time of Wang's publications in the 1980s. As the quote from Wang's set out at the beginning of this chapter suggests, its use as an unofficial manual or handbook for dealers to identify furniture may have resulted in greater quantities of furniture entering the commercial system, with the possible consequence of exportation.

Wang assigned names to individual groups and subgroups of furniture which he rationalised according to a broad range of cited and attributed historical and colloquial inputs. A democratic approach towards source material ranked the testimony of Beijing

⁵¹³ Wang, *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, 20.

⁵¹⁴ Wang, *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, 37.

⁵¹⁵ Wang, *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, 27. No explanation is given for the change in terminology.

craftsmen as equivalent in their ascendancy to archival Ming documents, a factor of Wang's approach and arguably a corollary of sociopolitical developments in China since the instatement of the People's Republic in 1949. In the event of conflicting terminology between sources of different origin, both sources are regarded as equally authoritative. For example, Wang notes that Beijing craftsmen refer to flat topped day beds with panels on three sides as *luohan chuang* 罗汉床 whereas "some Ming sources such as the *Sancai Tuihui* 三才图会 refer to these as *ta* 榻."⁵¹⁶ Wang did not directly articulate a logic for his sequential presentation of furniture objects within each of the identified five functional categories, but it is possible to point to an apparent tendency to organise furniture within each of the five category on a scale of complexity of form, starting with the least constructionally complex which may also correlate with chronological development of forms, though this is implicit rather than directly articulated. The analytical and structured approach towards classifying objects shown in *Connoisseurship* is perhaps best exemplified through Wang's diagrammatic schema of categories of "long recessed leg tables" as set out in Figure 3.7.

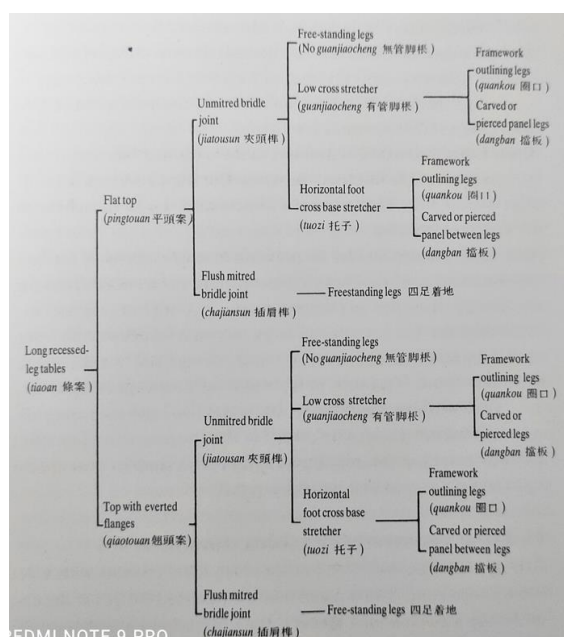


Figure 3.7 Chart illustrating recessed-leg table variations⁵¹⁷

A comparison between the taxonomy of Chinese furniture types defined in *Connoisseurship* and Yang Yao's rudimentary and somewhat haphazard approach earlier attempt at categorisation illustrates the development in knowledge of the subject matter and underscores the precise and methodical approach Wang applied to his research process. In

⁵¹⁶ Wang, *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, 76.

⁵¹⁷ Wang, *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, 63.

support of his taxonomy, Wang provided reference to observational, anecdotal and scholarly sources, exemplified by reference to the furniture pieces shown in the plates contained in the second volume. Yang Yao's earlier attempt sought to classify objects chronologically by indicating the place of each type of furniture within a linear stylistic or constructional timeline according to his estimation of their sequential development, commencing with bronze Han dynasty and wooden folding stools.⁵¹⁸ Although not expressly stated as an objective of the publication, a significant focus of *Connoisseurship* was in cataloguing, naming and identification of prototypical furniture pieces and their historical significance.⁵¹⁹ Paul Di Maggio has theorised that the importance of classification is in providing a basis for self-identification and the consumption of art as a marker of taste and signifier of cultural capital.⁵²⁰ The metaphysical importance of classifying art and the impact of order on perceived notions of value as it relates to the establishment of emergent art fields does not appear to be an area of study that has been extensively explored by art historians. In *The Theory of the Object*, Thomas Nail proposed that the origins of classification systems in early civilisations was conceive as a pastime of "urban scribal elites", which reached its apex in Greek Monism; the first lexical language being the categorisation of human beings themselves into a social structure or order. "Classification is not a universal or pre-given object but a historical and kinetic one... [which] implies both a division between ordered and unordered objects and a hierarchy of ordered objects. In addition to these previous operations, classification introduced a reorganisation of objects into new vertical and horizontal orders."⁵²¹

The resonant implication is that the process of ordering and sequencing of objects is not static but dependant on the kinesis of external factors including cultural and social interpretation. The act of classifying therefore provides a basis for differentiating structures against which to map objects, which may be further understood to reflect prevailing cultural and morphological symbiosis stemming from epistemological and economic factors. In effect, standardised nomenclature and groupings of objects provide a basis for comparison on which to base judgements of quality and historical significance ultimately leading to projections of aesthetic and pecuniary value. The process of ordering objects also has

⁵¹⁸ Chen, *Research on Ming Furniture*, 31-36.

⁵¹⁹ Referring to the second chapter, "The Types and Forms of Furniture" in Wang, *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*.

⁵²⁰ Paul De Maggio. "Classification in Art." *American Sociological Review* 52, no. 4 (1987): 440-55. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095290>.

⁵²¹ Thomas Nail. 2021. *Theory of the Object*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021. 122-123. Accessed 3 April 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/detail.action?docID=6852936>.

relevance to its collecting, as Nicholai Aristides has observed: “One of the distinctions between possessing and collecting is that the latter implies order, system, perhaps completion.”⁵²² Wang’s writing is approximately contemporaneous with the propagation of Di Maggio and Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological theories relating to the consumption and socially semaphoric signalling properties of art. Whilst there is no implicit suggestion that Wang’s effort to concretise a structural approach to the definition of Chinese furniture objects was consciously aligned with the desire to create a legitimising sphere within which furniture could be further appreciated, comprehended, ordered and ranked, the relationship between Wang’s writing and developments in collecting, art historical study and sociology and anthropology provide a contextual basis for the analysis and reception of Wang’s publications.

Archival evidence and identification of Ming source material

The cited source material in *Chinese Furniture* and *Connoisseurship* is rich with textual evidence from Ming publications relating to economic developments of the period which gave rise to an increase in demand for handcrafts and luxury goods. Contemporary literary evidence for the increased circulation of hardwood furniture in the Ming dynasty is cited by reference to Ming ‘tastemakers’ Tu Long 屠隆 (1542-1605), Gao Lian and Wen Zhenheng in both *Connoisseurship* and *Classic Chinese Furniture*. Coincident with Clunas’ analysis in both *Chinese Furniture* and later in *Superfluous Things*, Wen Zhenheng’s extensive and directly relevant descriptions of objects seems to have been considered most important by Wang. Implicit of the link between causative economic factors contributing to the considerable growth in handcraft production during the Ming dynasty, in *Classic Chinese Furniture* Wang referenced Ming contemporary sources related to both extrinsic and intrinsic levers for the development of the period he termed “The Golden Age” of Chinese furniture.⁵²³ Wang’s knowledge and citation of historic primary textual sources and his ability to combine archival studies of historic texts with experiential and observational research techniques differentiated his contribution to the written historiography on Chinese furniture in relation to both previous western and Chinese authors.

⁵²² Nicholai Aristides. “Life and Letters: Calm and Uncollected.” *The American Scholar*, 57, no. 3 (1988): 327-36, 330. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41211543>.

⁵²³ Wang Shixiang, *Classic Chinese Furniture*, 14.

A linear interconnection exists between the development and circulation of the Ming texts cited by Wang in *Connoisseurship* and *Classic Chinese Furniture* and circumstances promoting the availability and increased production of premium handcrafted goods, including furniture. An increase in rates of literacy, the consumption of printed matter and texts and the circulation of luxury items including hardwood furniture are markers of the social expansion of taste and knowledge associated with reinvigorated albeit fluctuating economic prosperity by the mid-Ming period.⁵²⁴ Wang's cited Ming and Qing texts and primary source materials attest to the changing teleological perceptions of personal and domestic objects such as furniture (along with other utilitarian items) and the catalytic impetus of socio-political developments of the Ming dynasty resulting in increased consumption of luxury items.

Studies such as those by Timothy Brook on Ming material culture identify that the development of printing technology and an educated middle class able to consume an extended spectrum of printed matter are consequential of the same economic and social circumstances giving rise to an increase in the production of furniture, other handcrafted luxury items.⁵²⁵ Paolo Santangelo has commented on the symbiosis between an increase in both literacy and the circulation of printed matter during this period.⁵²⁶ Text and object interacted to reflect dynamic social and ideological forces fuelling the appetite of a newly prosperous and educated Ming middle class to acquire and display the literary apparatus that historically visually defined the scholar-official class. Carla Nappi has noted that the resonance of a broadening range of available literature at low cost to an increasingly educated population in the late Ming on natural phenomena that shaped perceptions of the natural world.⁵²⁷ The confluence of formalistic and aspirational impetus propelling the exposition of literary pastimes and the selection and consumption of furniture and scholar's objects evocative of intellectual pursuits by a non-elite class was noted, apparently with some disapproval by the author Fan Lian 范廉 (b.1540) in *Yunjian jumu chao* 云间据目抄

⁵²⁴ The interlocation between literacy, social expression and the circulation of objects and printed matter is a theme explored in the chapter "The Business of Things" in Timothy Brook, *The Troubled Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010). Accessed 24.11.2021. ProQuest Ebook Central. For an examination of the economic and policy conditions giving rise to increased social prosperity in the Ming dynasty, see Xu Dixin and Wu Chengming, eds. *Chinese Capitalism, 1522-1840*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000) pp 23-81.

⁵²⁵ For a broader discussion on the economy in the Ming dynasty, see "Economy and Ecology" in Timothy Brook, *The Troubled Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties*, 106-133.

⁵²⁶ Paolo Santangelo, "The Literati's Polyphonic Answers to Social Changes in Late Imperial China", *Frontiers of History in China*, 12(3), (2017). 357-432: <https://doi.org/10.3868/s020-006-017-0018-7>

⁵²⁷ See Carla Nappi. 2009. *The Monkey and the Inkpot: Natural History and Its Transformations in Early Modern China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 5. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/detail.action?docID=3300842>.

(Records of things seen in Yunjian) in the following passage cited by Wang in *Classic Chinese Furniture*:

When I was young I saw but a few pieces of furniture, such as writing tables and large chairs, made from fine wood... During the Longqing [r.1567-72] and Wanli periods [1572-1620], even lower officials began to use fine wooden furniture, and cabinetmakers from Huizhou [prefecture, in Anhui province] opened shops in Yunjian where they made wedding furniture and other objects... It is strange that even those policemen who had a home would arrange a comfortable place to rest, supported 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!⁵²⁸

Clunas described Wang's discovery and inclusion of this quote from Fan Lian as significant and one which substantiates the relative novelty of hardwood furniture in the Ming period as an innovative departure from the archaistic monochrome lacquered surfaces of the Song dynasty.⁵²⁹ Fan Lian's attestation and that of his late-Ming contemporary Wang Shixing 王士性 (1547-1598) quoted in *Classic Chinese Furniture* confirm the fashion and popularity of hardwoods, especially *huanghuali* and *zitan* as markedly elevated in the late Ming period. These statements should be read together with Wang Shixiang's commentary on the maturity of form and design of furniture which he states was established by the time of the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279):

By the Northern Song (960-1127) all kinds of high furniture became prevalent and craftsmanship much more refined... 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... Furniture reached such a level of perfection as a result of the Song dynasty heritage⁵³⁰

The restrained, austere outlines of traditional Song furniture together with the distinctive figuration of hardwood surfaces prevalent by the late Ming encoded distinguishable visual and cultural cues to be understood and deciphered by others in

⁵²⁸ Wang, *Classic Chinese Furniture*, 14.

⁵²⁹ Clunas, *Chinese Furniture*, 155-156.

⁵³⁰ Wang, Shixiang, *Classic Chinese Furniture*, 14.

possession of similar taste and social capital. An extract from Wang Shixing's 王士性 (1546-1598) *Guangzhi yi* 广志绎 (On a variety of subjects) cited in *Classic Chinese Furniture* further reiterates the importance of antiquity in ornamentation, in particular design motifs which emulated archaic patternation such as that found on early dynastic bronzes, prized by imperial and scholarly collectors.⁵³¹ The fascination of the Chinese scholar elite class with the study and accumulation of antiquities and appreciation of their signification of virtue and legitimacy is arguably a consistently defining characteristic of Chinese visual and social culture dating to the earliest dynasties which continued to resonate in Ming culture. The inherently aspirational qualities of these subtle ornamentations and their associations with erudition, classical learning and legitimacy of position is readily connectable with the expansion of a newly minted and educated middle class in the mid-late Ming period. The desire of this socioeconomic group for consumption and self-expression provided fertile ground for the production of opulent and luxuriant handcrafted goods including furniture, is affirmed by the passages from Fan Lian and Wang Shixing referenced in *Classical Chinese Furniture*.

Wang's extracts from Fan Lian and Wang Shixing regarding the appropriation and private display of finely crafted furniture by a socially conscious and economically ascendent social group suggests that many of the furniture pieces today regarded as "classic" derive in actuality from a composite of causative political circumstances and a cultural heritage ingrained over centuries of dynastic change emphasising the legitimising values of early mythical empires. As Jonathan Hay has commented, luxury and decoration were intrinsically bound in a political discourse of taste relative to shifting social boundaries.⁵³²

The simplicity of these concise commentaries adumbrates a number of complex anthropological themes relative to social and economic mobility in the structure of mid to late Ming society which have been the focus of both Western and Chinese academic discourse. The continuity of furniture designs originating in the Song dynasty; tendency to include antique decorative elements and the transition from lacquered to wooden surfaces precipitated by the availability of foreign hardwoods afforded by altered political circumstances are brought together in historical references cited in Wang's relatively short introduction to *Classic Chinese Furniture*. Considered in triumvirate, cultural, political and social factors provide significant opportunity for analysis within the scope of modern art historical theory seeking to place the production of objects within their socioeconomic and

⁵³¹ See Wai-Yee Li, "The Collector, the Connoisseur, and Late-Ming Sensibility", *T'oung Pao*, 81(4), (1995) 269-302. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853295X00105>. 15.

⁵³² Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces*, 21-23

semaphoric contexts. The projection and assimilation of cultural values and external events onto objects is considered in Arjun Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things; Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Appadurai submits that "economic exchange creates value. Value is embodied in commodities that are exchanged... what creates the link between exchange and value is politics."⁵³³ Similarly, Baudrillard theorised that "The object is nothing but the different types of relations and significations that converge, contradict themselves, and twist around it", conflating the relative appositeness of use value, sign value, exchange value and symbolic exchange value as the nucleus of objectival signification."⁵³⁴

References to wood and regional variations

During Wang's extended period of research on Chinese furniture, estimated as occurring between 1943-5 and 1985, he attempted to establish a regional vocabulary based on the use of stylistic variation, use of materials and construction techniques. Wang's cross-disciplinary approach to researching questions of regional stylistic and constructional identities of furniture consisted of an investigation of Ming literary sources and gazetteers as well as information gathering visits to Chinese provinces which had been centres of manufacturing.⁵³⁵ The object of these surveys was to seek to decode a regional basis on which the origins of furniture could be understood with the unspecified aim of uncovering further information about the facts surrounding their production.⁵³⁶ Wang's approach to his topic mirrors the experiential Ming literati approach to empirical research. Peter Miller and Francois Louis (2012) note that travel for research purposes within China's borders gained favour during the 16th century facilitated by improved transport and road networks and the desire to supplement knowledge gained from regional gazetteers with empirical

⁵³³ Arjun Appadurai. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities In Cultural Perspective*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). <https://hdl-handle-net.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/2027/heh.32141>. Appadurai also theorised that the phenomenon of globalisation originated in the 16th Century across all continents, including Asia. "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy", *Theory Culture Society* 1990; 7; 295 DOI: 10.1177/026327690007002017.

⁵³⁴ Jean Baudrillard. 1981. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. St Louis, Missouri: Telos Press. 62-66.

⁵³⁵ These research trips took place over a forty-year period when Wang was at times imprisoned during the cultural revolution and consigned to hard labour in Hubei province (1969-73). China's transportation infrastructure was at that time undeveloped, impeding travel within the Chinese mainland. Wang's visits to Suzhou are recorded as taking place in 1979-80, by which time little furniture remained in what is recognised as an important centre of furniture manufacture. See *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, 20.

⁵³⁶ Wang, *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, 19-24.

observation.⁵³⁷ As Wang Shixiang commented in *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, “to verify the truth of documentary material, I made several visits to the Suzhou area in 1979 and 1980.”⁵³⁸

Thus far writers on Chinese furniture had limited their enquires on geographic nuclei of the production of fine furniture to Beijing and Suzhou. Among earlier and contemporary authors on Chinese furniture both previous and contemporary, Clunas was unique in addressing the location of Chinese furniture production centres with any level of specificity or evidence. Suzhou is typically evidenced as an important centre of furniture production through reference to Wen Zhenheng’s *Treatise on Superfluous Things* and Wang Shixing’s *Guang Zhi Yi*.⁵³⁹ Ecke referred to the skill and respect for materials of the “Craftsmen of Soochow.” Kates was rather abstract in relation to the methods of production and did not comment on location of manufacture.⁵⁴⁰ Both Clunas and Wang referenced the writing of Li Yu as evidence for Yangzhou as a centre of production. Additionally, he noted that *jumu* furniture was produced to exceptionally high standards, commensurate terms of design and quality of craftsmanship with that exhibited in *huanghuali* furniture but that furniture in *huanghuali* was not to be found in Suzhou by the time of his research visits. Given the prevalence of *huanghuali* furniture in and around Beijing, the inference may be that *huanghuali* furniture was transported to the capital whereas *jumu* furniture, produced with locally available Southern Elm, may have been retained in Suzhou. Wang notes that during his visits to Suzhou in 1979 and 1980, he had been able to identify *jumu* tables of the same quality as *huanghuali*.⁵⁴¹

Of his time in Yangzhou, he wrote: “My visit to Yangzhou in the summer of 1979 proved fruitless, with only a pair of waistless oak stools.... being found in the home of Wei Jisheng ... after two frustrating weeks of investigation”. This result did not bear out Li Yu’s quote in *Li Weng Ou Ji* that chairs and stools produced in Yangzhou were of better quality than those produced in Suzhou.⁵⁴² According to Clunas, writing in *Elegant Debts: The Social Art of Wen Zhengming 1470-1559*, the use of the term “Suzhou” more often referred to the broader region around Suzhou; however, it is unlikely that either Kates or Ecke would have

⁵³⁷ Peter N. Miller and François Louis, eds., *Antiquarianism and Intellectual Life in Europe and China, 1500-1800*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012. 299-300.

⁵³⁸ Wang Shixiang, *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, 20.

⁵³⁹ Craig Clunas (1988), *Chinese Furniture*, 10-11, 19, 66-96. Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, 1991, contains numerous references to Suzhou as a centre for craftsmanship and luxury good production from various Ming dynasty sources. In *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, Wang Shixiang cited Chang Han’s ‘Notes on Hundreds of Crafts’ as evidence of handcraft furniture production in Suzhou.

⁵⁴⁰ Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 1.

⁵⁴¹ Wang, *Connoisseurship*, 20 - Fig1.10.

⁵⁴² Wang, *Connoisseurship*, 23.

been sufficiently familiar with outlying towns in the Wu prefecture to be able to make any particular distinction.⁵⁴³ With perhaps greater specificity than Clunas though equal intent, Wang refers to the major cities lying close to Suzhou as “*Sanwu*” referencing an expert from the Ming dynasty text *Songchuang mengyu* 松窗梦语 (Daydreams from the Pine Window) by Zhang Han 张瀚 (1510-1593); a chapter in *Wulin wangzhe yizhu* 武林往哲遗著 (A Collection of Works by Scholars of Wulin) an area unrivalled “south of the Yangtze river” for “beautiful and fine” products.⁵⁴⁴ Moreover, Wang locates the nexus of Suzhou’s reputation for the production of superlative quality furniture as deriving from the village of Xiangshang, described as a “village 20 miles southwest of Suzhou” where more than half of the population were carpenters. Wang attributed this information to a regional gazetteer from a “Qing manuscript in National Library, Beijing” and a short passage from the Ming dynasty *Huangming jilue* 皇明纪略 (Emperors of the Ming Dynasty) by Huang Fulu 皇甫录 (1470-1540).⁵⁴⁵

In relation to references on wood types and materials, Wang’s access to archives in the Palace Museum and his ability to locate historic texts facilitated the development of research which ascribed historical significance through an investigation of the primary source materials to Chinese furniture production. To substantiate the estimation in which furniture woods were held, Wang referenced the prices attached to various woods for the excise purposes. A list of prices from Liang Tingnan’s 梁廷柅, *Yue haiguan zhi* 粤海关志 (Guangdong maritime customs gazetteer), published in the Daoguang period (1820-1850) and completed in 1839 substantiates that *zitan* and *hualimu*, closely followed by *huangyangmu* (boxwood) and *huamu* (burlwood) were the most highly valued woods (following a presumption that that market forces correlate with customs values).⁵⁴⁶ Although Wang did not provide dates for the *Yue haiguan zhi*, in view of his own submission that the “golden age” of Chinese furniture commenced in the Jiajing period and ended in the Yongzheng reign (broadly, 1521-1735) this source falls beyond the period of Wang’s focus. Perhaps most interesting is a brief reference to costs of woods according to customs records in 1567. The values set out in *Connoisseurship* suggest that between 1567 and c. 1839 when

⁵⁴³ Clunas, *Elegant Debts*, 96.

⁵⁴⁴ Wang, *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, 19. Title translation Wang Shixiang.

⁵⁴⁵ Wang, *Connoisseurship*, 19 and 25. The Qing dynasty quote is attributed to a passage by Xu Zhuxian 徐翥先 (n.d.) in *Xiangshan xiaozhi*. Title translation Wang Shixiang.

⁵⁴⁶ Wang Shixiang, *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, 149. Boxwood and burlwood are not available in large quantities and their relative scarcity may have some consequence on their pricing.

the *Yue haiguan zhi* was published, the cost differential between *zitan* and *huanghuali* had narrowed by around 50%.⁵⁴⁷

In their focus on ‘classic’ models with minimal decorative elements constructed in a narrow range of hardwoods with an emphasis on *huanghuali* and *zitan*, Wang Shixiang’s publications subscribe to and perpetuate the same ideas around Chinese furniture as were expounded by Gustav Ecke in *Chinese Domestic Furniture* in 1944. This highly selective approach has had a significant reverberative effect on collecting practices both in China and in the West. Later writers have sought to establish further subdivisions for understanding furniture; for example, based on the nexus of production within China. As has been noted, Wang Shixiang’s inherent cultural capital enabled him to transverse East and West and to collaborate with museums and collectors from both China and America. Wang wrote the forward to several important publications, including the catalogue for the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture in Renaissance, California, and the collection of C.L. Ma, a dealer in Chinese furniture whose collection of early Chinese furniture is located in Tianjin, China.

Chinese Furniture Research After Wang Shixiang

A combination of personal agency, social capital and the availability of publications in both English and Chinese made Wang Shixiang among the best known of Chinese furniture scholars. Wang’s writing contributed to an extension in scholarship and classification of furniture types and objects though it is clear that the selection of objects represented a continuation of the aesthetic ideal established by the Western historiography. However, consideration of the work of Tian Jiaqing 田家青 (1953-) and Hu Desheng 胡德生 (1949-2022) add another dimension to research in Chinese and from Chinese writers on indigenous furniture heritage. Tian is recognized as a protégé of Wang Shixiang and Hu worked as a curator at the Palace Museum in Beijing focused on the study and restoration of furniture.

Hu and Tian substantiate a critical departure from both Wang and Western scholarship through an inclusive approach to furniture styles and materials. Both writers addressed a critical gap left by the historiography derived from Western writers which

⁵⁴⁷ Wang’s 1569 values for wood were cited from the *Tax Regulations for the Customs of East and West in Zhejiang Province*.

subscribed to the austere, discriminative aesthetic of classical furniture, turning attention to palace-style furniture from the Qing dynasty constructed in a wider variety of materials. Tian Jiaxing's best known publication, *Classic Chinese Furniture of the Qing Dynasty*, published in 1996, focused on the type of ornate and highly carved furniture eschewed by Western collectors.⁵⁴⁸ Of the pieces included in the book, 46% are in *zitan* with a further 18% in *hongmu*; 6.5% in *jichimu* and 11% in *huanghuali*. Published in both English and Chinese, Tian included furniture items from diverse international collections such as a highly carved lacquer throne from the collection of the NAMA (Figure 3.8) and items from Beijing furniture dealers. As the number of furniture items in *zitan* and *hongmu* suggests, Tian included imperial furniture alongside furniture for domestic use, noting that the construction of furniture items in the Qing dynasty was of equivalent quality to Ming craftsmanship.⁵⁴⁹ The textual element of the book analyses the modern collecting focus on classical Chinese furniture of the Ming dynasty and rationalises the change in style which followed the Manchu conquest of China in 1644 and multiplicity of styles that prevailed during this period.⁵⁵⁰

Similarly, Hu Desheng's writing on Chinese furniture displays a comprehensive approach to documenting furniture pieces and materials which do not subscribe to the modernist aesthetic and singular focus on pieces constructed in *huanghuali*. As a researcher and curator at the Forbidden City, many of Hu's books, such as 你应该知道的200件镶嵌家具 *Ni yinggai zhidao de 200 jian xiangqian jiaju* (Two hundred pieces of inlaid furniture you should know about) and other books in the series which concentrate on specific furniture types including imperial furniture, painted furniture and *zitan* drew on the collection of Forbidden City and Palace Museum in Beijing.⁵⁵¹ Hu also challenged ideas around which pieces of furniture were regarded as significant purely by reference to materials, and has noted that in fact a wider range of woods were used to manufacture fine furniture, including ebony (乌木, *wumu*) and persimmon wood (柿木, *shimu*).⁵⁵² As Stephen Davies has noted, the interpretation of works of art is defined by reference to the art tradition in which they were produced and simultaneously by contemporary circumstance and context relative to the

⁵⁴⁸ Tian Jiaqing. 1996. *Classic Chinese Furniture of the Qing Dynasty*. Hong Kong, London: Joint Publishing (Hong Kong) Company: Philip Wilson.

⁵⁴⁹ Tian, *Classic Furniture*, 37.

⁵⁵⁰ Tian, *Classical Furniture*, 20.

⁵⁵¹ Hu Desheng. 2009. *Ni yinggai zhidao de 200 jian xiangqian jiaju* 你应该知道的200件镶嵌家具 (Two hundred pieces of inlaid furniture you should know about). Beijing: Forbidden City Press.

⁵⁵² Hu Desheng. 2008. *Gu jiaju shoucang yu jianshang* 古家具收藏与鉴赏 (Collection and Appreciation of Antique Furniture). Xian: Shaanxi People's Publishing House. 100-101.

environment of the viewer which may impart new meaning and significance.⁵⁵³ It is conceivable that in China, imperial art objects would take on a revised meaning in the new sociopolitical paradigm that followed China's economic opening up in 1978. Unconstrained by aesthetic and collecting criteria, and perhaps also liberated from political concerns and concepts of commercial value, Tian and Hu wrote for a wider audience interested in the history of Chinese furniture rather than for collectors pursuing furniture which subscribed to a singular aesthetic valued by the international art market. Whilst not widely distributed outside China, the work of Chinese authors charts a new history of indigenous Chinese furniture, defined by heritage and cultural awareness rather than by Western collecting tastes and practices.

⁵⁵³ Stephen Davies. 2016. *The Philosophy of Art*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell. 124-126.

CHAPTER 4: TEXT OBJECT DIALECTIC: ALIGNING HISTORIOGRAPHY AND COLLECTING PRACTICES

The sign which carries meaning is able to do so because, unlike we ourselves who must die, it bears an ‘eternal’ relationship to the receding past, and it is this we experience as the power of ‘the actual object’.

Susan M. Pearce, *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, 1994.⁵⁵⁴

The closing chapter of this thesis addresses the coaction and dynamic interdependence between the written historiography and collecting of Chinese classic furniture in practice. As evidenced in this thesis, the conception and status of Chinese Ming and early Qing hardwood furniture as a field of art is rooted in the practices of connoisseurship and founded on the acquisition of objects from which the literature emanated and advanced. The historiographical publications analysed in the preceding chapters have been shown to be intrinsically interlinked with the formation of both private and institutional collections. In the case of collected items curated by the authors and illustrated in (for example) Gustav Ecke’s *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, or Wang Shixiang’s *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, the author’s initial collecting activity and the selection of objects owned by other collectors, engendered the initial publication. In a circular fashion, these publications then furthered the collecting of similar types of objects and preceded their accession to the status of collectable item worthy of museum display.

The analysis in these publications necessitated the formation of an accompanying historical narrative which was constructed principally on observational and experiential description, interwoven with pictorial and literary source material which strengthened in sophistication over time. In understanding the connection between historical references and objectival value, as Lissant Bolton has observed, at the point of first collection the object’s physical properties alone are sufficient to attach historical and aesthetic value.⁵⁵⁵ For societal estimation of worth to augment resulting in eventual elevation to museum status, substantive knowledge of the object’s material and cultural historical significance becomes important as a legitimising source of historical value. Material cultural analysis and narrative requires the

⁵⁵⁴ Susan M. Pearce. 1994. *Interpreting Objects and Collections*. London: Routledge. 25.

⁵⁵⁵ Lissant Bolton. “A tale of two figures: knowledge around objects in museum collections”, *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, vol. 146, no. 1, 2018, 85-98.

construction of a narrative based on substantive cultural truths about the society in which objects were conceived, designed and produced. In the absence of an apposite body of primary source material, as with Chinese domestic furniture, the written modern historiography has assumed an important role in determining aesthetic judgements and cultural preferences.

The advent of modernist principles and the physical transfer of objects between cultures accelerated the assimilation and recasting of foreign-made goods by non-originating communities. Through reference to a non-exhaustive group of archetypal or epochal collections, this chapter seeks to demonstrate the confluence between the written historiography and related collecting practices in the curation of objects within a group and the empirical narrative construct that accompanied the physical gathering and grouping together of objects. As described previously in this thesis, international political and cultural relations were foundational to the inception of classic Chinese furniture collecting. The presence of Westerners in Beijing, which was less developed and more authentically “Chinese” than Shanghai, in the early decades of the twentieth century created conditions for the acquisition of Ming-style Chinese furniture. Paraphrasing the writing of Walter Benjamin, Ackbar Abbas has argued that “certain practices of collecting, like certain textual practices, are alternative means of laying hold of experience in modernity.”⁵⁵⁶ The notion of “laying hold of experience” may have held a particular relevance to the Western residents of China in the pre-war period, caught between a rapidly developing and shifting global reality defined by political and cultural fluidity and disequilibrium whilst surrounded by the spectacle of archaicism and historical continuity in a China on the cusp of modernity and dissolution. The tension between dissipating temporospatial worlds invokes Benjamin’s theorem that art outlives the intentions of its creator to form multiple overlapping histories understood by subsequent collectors or onlookers within the context of their perspectives on the originating culture:

“For the person who is concerned with works of art in a historically dialectical mode, these works integrate their pre as well as post-history; and it is their post-history which illuminates their pre-history as a continuous process of change... this effect does not rest in an encounter with the work of art alone but in an encounter with the history which has allowed the work to come down to our own age.”⁵⁵⁷

⁵⁵⁶ Ackbar Abbas. “Walter Benjamin’s Collector: The Fate of Modern Experience.” *New Literary History* 20, no. 1 (1988): 217-37. <https://doi.org/10.2307/469329>. 228.

⁵⁵⁷ Walter Benjamin and Knut Tarnowski. “Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian.” *New German Critique*, no. 5 (1975): 27-58. <https://doi.org/10.2307/487918>. 28.

In identifying specific desirable visual cues such as simplicity of form and eliminating attributes deemed inadmissible (for example, ornate carving) the pioneer Western historiographers and collectors of Chinese classic furniture assembled a historical synthesis of both object and fact informed by their own aesthetic theories and fields of reference relative to propensities external to the originating culture. According to Robert F. Berkhofer, the relevance of objects as artefacts of the past, which he terms “survivals”, is dependent on their ability to fit into a “framework or context [which] derives in turn from the desires and needs of the historians and their society and culture.”⁵⁵⁸ As Berkhofer submits, the items that endure are inherently the records of “great men and great families or stories of the nation state and nationality.”⁵⁵⁹ For a nation in political flux, these narrative histories varied depending on the perspective of the author in determining who or what constituted the nation state.⁵⁶⁰ Similarly, the identification of “great men and great families” in a post-imperial society now hinged on a different set of transmutable values. Examples of the relationships between Western historiographers of Chinese furniture and the scions of established Qing literati families cited previously in this thesis include those between Ferguson and the Qing official Duanfang; and Gustav Ecke and Liang Sicheng.⁵⁶¹

In this chapter, through analysis of specific and representative collections both in America, the Chinese Mainland and Hong Kong, I consider how broader socioeconomic and political conditions have precipitated collecting patterns and are both reflected and shaped by the historiography discussed in the foregoing chapters. As noted at pages 44-45 of my Introduction, the collections reviewed in this section are intentionally representative rather than exhaustive to enable a more comprehensive examination of the collected pieces and the motivating factors and circumstances behind the intention of the collectors translated into a narrative which internationalised Chinese furniture. In some cases, the geographical method of selection of case studies which is described more fully on these pages, has been driven by practicality as well as the ability to draw lines between the formation of the collection, dealer-collector relationships described in Chapter Two (at page 114) and historiographical developments. Examples of collections are organised sequentially and chronologically, charting the advancement and evolution of furniture collecting with a theoretical evaluation

⁵⁵⁸ Robert F. Berkhofer. (2008). “Historical Synthesis”. In: *Fashioning History*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230617209_2. 5.

⁵⁵⁹ Berkhofer, “Historical Synthesis”, 6.

⁵⁶⁰ See Lloyd Kramer. “Historical Narratives and the Meaning of Nationalism.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58, no. 3 (1997): 525-45. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3653913>. 528-9.

⁵⁶¹ Conversely, the relationship that existed between Ecke and Yang Yao whose familial background did not subscribe to this social milieu.

of the place of furniture collections in both institutional settings (museums), private and domestic dwellings, and the partially private, controlled and individualised spaces of private museums.

1. Furniture as functional collectible: Discovery and formative collecting in Beijing

The acquisition of hardwood Ming-style furniture by expatriates in Beijing during the period from 1920 to 1945 originated not as art collecting in its purest sense but to meet the functional requirements of domestic daily life, in particular for foreigners living outside the confines of the legation quarter with its European streets and comfortable living quarters. According to Kates, whose own rented lodgings within the imperial palace walls, were described in *The Years That Were Fat*, a tendency known as “going native.”⁵⁶² It may be hypothesised that the process of localisation created greater opportunity for intercultural dialogue and the appropriation of Chinese perspectives on interior design and taste, including in the setting up and equipping of interiors. Writing of the Chinese furniture and design favoured by Oswald Sirén (1879-1966) a Swedish academic present in China between 1921-1923, Minna Törmä has commented on the appeal of such decorative souvenirs but has observed that for the original residents of Beijing, furniture was often acquired in the course of establishing the home and to consider the gathering of these pieces a “collection” may be incorrect.⁵⁶³ Although through their publications on the subject matter, Ecke and Kates would become strongly associated with Chinese furniture, none of the early writers on Chinese furniture specialised exclusively in this area: in actuality, of the former Beijing residents cited in this study, only the Drummond brothers would go on to achieve commercial success from their involvement with Chinese hardwood furniture through the shipments of furniture exported from China and copies made in Hong Kong and exported to New York.⁵⁶⁴ A 1949 article in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* described how the Drummonds

⁵⁶² Kates, *The Years That Were Fat*, 12.

⁵⁶³ Minna Törmä. 2021. *Nordic Private Collections of Chinese Objects*. Vol. 5. New York, NY: Routledge. 104. Accessed 04 December 22. doi:10.4324/9780429435041.

⁵⁶⁴ The Drummond brothers’ principal contribution to the historiography of Chinese furniture was delivered in the form of a lecture delivered by William Drummond in 1969, related to the circulation of objects and to the compilation of collections, notably Arthur Sackler’s collection which became the foundation of the public collection of Chinese furniture in the Smithsonian. Unlike other names mentioned here the Drummonds added little to the historiography of Chinese classical furniture and are best known for their role in establishing Arthur Sackler’s collection despite the absence of archival research materials, having authored only one article on the topic. William M. Drummond, “Chinese Furniture: The Sackler Collections”, reproduced in *The Journal of Classical Chinese Furniture*, Summer 1993, 54-66.

procured antiques for the Asian art importer Price L. Rogers: “Mrs Price is able to bring antiques on the long trip from Peiping... thanks to two recognised collectors, Robert and William Drummond, who are constantly on the lookout for interesting antiques for her.”⁵⁶⁵

Firsthand information on the acquisition process of furniture pieces within collections is typically cursory in nature, such as the following statement written by Sickman to Laurance Roberts, (1907-2002) then Curator of Oriental Art at the Brooklyn Museum, in a letter sent from Beijing in 1936: “There is a set of cupboards in Furniture Street now that are grand, in rather red wood *huang hua li*, extra wide with lovely fancy plain brasses.”⁵⁶⁶ Exemplifying materials on furniture in use is letter sent from Kates in Beijing to Mrs. Francis, the mother of a Harvard school friend, describing the living arrangements in his courtyard house: “...sunny little rooms, all agleam with good wood and polished brass or copper or red lacquered leather, all north Chinese, all beautiful - simple too, beyond any general knowledge of this furniture in the West!”⁵⁶⁷ Corroborating these experiential views, the transcript of an interview with Laurance Roberts who lived in Beijing during the period between 1932-1933, provides further insights into the process of acquiring furniture:

The Chinese furniture which is now so valued and appreciated was just being found. One would go out and bargain for this—they thought—uh, northern furniture—the simple kind, not the carved, blackwood kind. And the chairs cost only a few dollars apiece. For everything—all sorts of things would be bought very cheaply. And it still had, of course, a—a faint odor of imperial grandeur about it.⁵⁶⁸

Kates’ memoir provides a textual description of Caroline Bieber’s “country house” outside Beijing, with a note that “the excellent simple furniture that she had transported from town was arranged to perfection in that setting.” Photographic images in a small album comprising seven black and white images of Bieber’s house in the NAMA Archives illustrate this furniture *in situ*. This small, unpublished photographic album is perhaps the best evidence of Chinese hardwood furniture in use and on display that exists of this period,

⁵⁶⁵ Marcia Strousse. “Modern Furniture Echoes Old China.” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. 18 December 1949. 151. Accessed 03 August 2024. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/173726552/>

⁵⁶⁶ Letter from Laurence Sickman to Laurance Roberts, dated 1 June 1936. Brooklyn Museum Archives, Office of the Director Records

⁵⁶⁷ George Kates. Letter to Mrs. Francis. 2 October (no year). George N. Kates Letters, 1946-1960. AAA, Smithsonian Institution.

⁵⁶⁸ Oral history interview with Laurance P. Roberts, 1985 July 26-29. AAA, Smithsonian Institution. <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-laurance-p-roberts-12943>

alongside photographs of Laurence Sickman and his mother from the same archive. Only two of the pieces of furniture in the images from Bieber's album are recognisable: the first a *huanghuali* "armchair" shown in a photograph of the bedroom (Figure 4.1), which is item 79 (Figure 4.2) in *Chinese Household Furniture* and attributed to Bieber's ownership. The second item is a low chest, shown in the photograph of Bieber's sitting room, (Figure 4.3) which is item ninety-nine in *Chinese Household Furniture* (Figure 4.4). This item is described as constructed in *yumu* wood and belonging to Jean-Pierre Dubosc, (1903-1988) French diplomat and son-in-law to C.T. Loo.⁵⁶⁹ Given Bieber's reputation as an art dealer as well as collector, it may be the case that by the time the photographic record of the items in *Chinese Household Furniture* was made ownership of the chest had changed from Bieber to Dubosc. A further image of Chinese furniture in use during this period can be seen in a photograph of Laurence Sickman and his mother, May Sickman which shows Sickman sitting on a "lamp hanger" chair and with a classic Chinese table with double stretchers in the foreground. (Figure 4.5)

In Figure 4.3, the photograph showing the corner of Bieber's sitting room, stands an example of a folding chair which presumably was not included in *Chinese Household Furniture* due to its imperial rather than domestic provenance. Despite the personal nature and utility value of furniture items, distinct from other objects of artistic significance, it is apparent that furniture items changed hands between the collectors and owners of objects. A letter from the dealer Charlotte Horstmann (1933-2021) to Laurence Sickman dated 19 May 1973 reads: "I have come across a piece of Ming furniture, which I sold years ago in Peking. Originally it belonged to Jean Pierre Dubosc. Is illustrated in Ecke's book, page 24 Nr 18 on one *Huang Huali Kang* and still has the original woven mattress. It is in perfect condition."⁵⁷⁰ The historiographical recording of objects in the course of sale and in publications such as those reviewed and analysed in the foregoing chapters of this thesis attest to the fungibility of items between owners and their environments. Archival documentation from sales records presents source material for provenance research which attests to the ongoing life of historic objects in transition as well as to their credibility and authenticity in the art market.

⁵⁶⁹ Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*, Figure 99, 115.

⁵⁷⁰ Letter, Horstmann to Sickman. RG02 Dept of Oriental Art: Series I.L.S-A Correspondence. Horstmann, Charlotte 1958-72 4. Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Archives.

The sale of George Kates' furniture at Parke-Bernet auction house in New York on 28 January 1955 provides a basis for examining the transient motion of objects in history.⁵⁷¹ Following the logic of Arjun Appadurai's social lives of objects and Igor Kopytoff's "cultural biography of things" the combined documentation presents a wealth of data and information that attests to the cultural footprint of these items as they appear in the public realm before being absorbed back into the private sphere and fading from view, unless they are institutionalised and put on permanent display.⁵⁷² A pair of *huali* continuous horseshoe backed armchairs (Figure 4.6) and a *huali* table (Figure 4.7) formerly in the collection of George Kates exemplify this phenomenon. In 1946 the pair of armchairs were displayed in the furniture exhibition curated by Kates at the Brooklyn Museum (Figure 2.1).⁵⁷³ They were disposed of in the Parke-Bernet sale of Kates' Chinese furniture in 1955 where they were acquired by the Cleveland Museum of Art as part of a group of five items from Kates' collection. The acquisition was documented by Sherman Lee, Curator of Oriental Art at the Museum in 1957 as the gift of Mrs R. Henry Norweb.⁵⁷⁴ After the sale, Kates wrote regretfully of the disposal and the loss of "so much irreplaceable beauty" to Sickman.⁵⁷⁵ Of the five pieces that entered the Cleveland Museum of Art collection, only one, a scroll end altar table constructed in camphor wood with *hungmu* veneer (described by Kates as a 'formal' table) had been included in *Chinese Household Furniture*, further evidence that, as noted at page 19 and 84, Kates had not participated in the original selection of objects documented in the book which bears his name.⁵⁷⁶

2. Early exhibitions of Chinese furniture in America

Temporary exhibitions of Chinese classical furniture in America from the 1940s onwards demonstrate the elevation of functional objects to the institutionalised sanctity of

⁵⁷¹ See Parke Bernet. 1955. *Important Chinese Furniture of the XVII-XVIII Century, Boxes Lamps and Other Decorative Objects, Chinese Jades & Other Semi-Precious Mineral Carvings...*, *The Property of Dr George N. Kates*. Sale 27-28 January 1955. New York: Parke-Bernet. 84.

⁵⁷² Igor Kopytoff. "The Cultural Biography of Things." In: Arjun Appadurai, ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge University Press; 1986. 64-92. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520340770-008>.

⁵⁷³ Brooklyn Museum, "Chinese Household Furniture from the Collection of George Kates." Exhibition 21 February 1946 - 31 March 1946. <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/exhibitions/847>. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁵⁷⁴ Sherman Lee. "Chinese Domestic Furniture." *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 44, no. 3 (1957): 48-53. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25142197>.

⁵⁷⁵ George Kates. Letter to Laurence Sickman. 17 July 1955. George N. Kates Papers. AAA, Smithsonian Institution.

⁵⁷⁶ Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*, Item 29, 78. Side Table with Everted Ends. Cleveland Museum of Art (clevelandart.org). The Norweb Collection, 1955.42.

the museum space. Michel Foucault has observed the perceived antagonism “between public and private space, between family space and social space and between cultural space and useful space.”⁵⁷⁷ These oppositional forces were inherent in the transition of furniture from the domestic environment where they were employed in semblance their original functional purpose, towards elevation and recognition as art within the museum. Foucault considered these spaces as “heterotopias... proper to western cultures of the 19th century,” simultaneously oppressive and utopian which reflect transformative changes across linked fields of knowledge including philosophy, politics, economics and philology.⁵⁷⁸ Once acceded to the museum, objects acquired “sign value,” with prior knowledge as condition precedent for the sign to be deconstructed by an audience.⁵⁷⁹ In this context, in order to both possess and convey sign value, sufficient interpretive knowledge needed to be in circulation for the sign to be read by an informed and receptive viewer as an extension of which signs which are “rare, useful [and] desirable” acquire sufficient institutional power to be interchangeable for a nominal monetary value.⁵⁸⁰

The practical use of Chinese hardwood furniture in context of its original function by expatriates in Beijing, initially in the autochthonous setting of the courtyard house as described in text by Kates and others, transmogrified as former Beijing residents returned to the West with their collections. The process of elevation to the institutional museum environment in America began initially through the exhibition of furniture items bought back from China in the 1940s by former expatriate Beijing residents. The first exhibitions in museums in America were the exhibitions of the Kullgren collection at LACMA between 1942 and 1948, followed by the exhibition of George Kates’ Chinese furniture at the Brooklyn Museum in 1946. Whilst the exhibition of Kates’ collection is relatively well recorded, until this time, the only record of the Kullgren collection and exhibition at LACMA have been in the form of two synoptic essays entitled “Early Chinese Furniture,” written by Gregor Norman-Wilcox and published in 1942 in the *LACMA Quarterly* and in 1943 in *The Magazine Antiques*.⁵⁸¹ A collection of archival records of the Kullgren collection and its exhibition at LACMA have recently been identified and are in the possession of Chinese furniture dealer and expert Nicholas Grindley. These have not been analysed previously but

⁵⁷⁷ Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec. “Of Other Spaces.” *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22-27. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464648>. 26. Accessed 10.03.2024.

⁵⁷⁸ Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 26.

⁵⁷⁹ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 67.

⁵⁸⁰ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 187.

⁵⁸¹ Gregor Norman-Wilcox. “Early Chinese Furniture.” *Quarterly*, LACMA Museum Patrons Association. Vol 2. No. 1. (Los Angeles, Calif.) 2 (January 1942): 6-10. Gregor Norman-Wilcox. 1943. “Early Chinese Furniture II.” *Magazine Antiques* (1943) 43 (April): 167-70. (Reprinted in the *Journal of the Classical Chinese Furniture Society*. Autumn 1991. Vol 1 No. 4. 48-55.)

will be examined here for their significance in recording the earliest exhibition of Chinese hardwood furniture in America.

Although Norman-Wilcox's two articles were published under the name "Early Chinese Furniture," both text and illustration were entirely distinct. The first, published in 1942 in the LACMA *Quarterly*, was evidently written to accompany the exhibition: "It should be a revelation, then, to inspect the Kullgren collection... to our knowledge no western museum has ever shown a collection of these early type pieces."⁵⁸² Norman-Wilcox's reference points for comparison with English "Chinese Chippendale" furniture, although an illustration of two horseshoe-back armchairs shows chairs of similar form, one in hardwood and the other in painted lacquer. The latter chair was described as in the collection of Edith Terry, "engraved in red lacquer... further enlivened with carelessly painted greens and yellows to please gaudier eighteenth-century taste."⁵⁸³ (Figure 4.8) Although information in both articles is limited, *huanghuali*, *jichimu* and *nanmu* are referenced as primary cabinet woods. The only information provided in the articles that provides insight into the formation of the collection is a note that "All of these things were found in, or near Peking."⁵⁸⁴

John F. Kullgren (1906-1976) is believed to have been born in China and employed at the Swedish legation in Beijing before relocating to America in the early 1940s, from which time his collection seems to have been present there. There is little information of substance that exists beyond both the archive and recent auction records to substantiate Kullgren's engagement with Chinese culture or art collecting. The archives, which are in the possession of Nicholas Grindley, consists of photographs of furniture from the collection, correspondence, and the 1958 Parke-Bernet auction catalogue of the Kullgren furniture collection sale. In addition, the archives contain a short unpublished manuscript on Chinese furniture written by Ernst von Harringa (1899-1961). Scant biographical records suggest that von Harringa lived in China and trained in cabinet making before becoming director of an art gallery in Los Angeles.⁵⁸⁵ His unpublished manuscript is assumed to have been written after the exhibition at LACMA as the bibliography includes a reference to Ecke's *Chinese Domestic Furniture* and begins with the words: "Some years ago the author saw the famous John F. Kullgren collection of Ming dynasty furniture on exhibit at the Los Angeles County

⁵⁸² Norman-Wilcox, "Early Chinese Furniture," *Quarterly*, 10.

⁵⁸³ Norman-Wilcox, "Early Chinese Furniture II," 54.

⁵⁸⁴ Norman-Wilcox, "Early Chinese Furniture," *Quarterly*, 10.

⁵⁸⁵ Martin Starr. 2024. 'Hoc Id Est', *The Unknown God: W. T. Smith and the Thelemites*. New York: online edn, Oxford Academic. 278. Accessed 15 July, 2024.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197744512.003.0019>,

Museum.”⁵⁸⁶ Correspondence in the archives notes that Ernst von Harringa “was the one who organised and made possible the exhibition in the museum in Los Angeles.”⁵⁸⁷

Von Harringa’s manuscript addressed subjects such as the history and evolution of furniture models and their interconnection with modern architecture, notes on important cabinet woods and a romanticised study on the status of the carpenter in Ming society. The manuscript contained two credible pieces of information not previously addressed by other Western authors. The first is an extensive description of the collection process for “Sichuan wax” a traditional insect wax produced in Sichuan province which was historically used to polish furniture. The second relates to the status of *nanmu* as a wood revered by the Chinese and reserved for imperial use. Although *zitan* is acknowledged as “the most distinguished cabinetwood,” Von Harringa recounted the status of *nanmu* in Chinese culture, citing *The Middle Kingdom*, written by the American missionary, Samuel Wells Williams, (1812-1884) first published in 1848, as the source of this information. Wells Williams described “*nan-muh*” as a type of laurel tree, the use of which was subject to sumptuary laws.⁵⁸⁸ The significance of *nanmu* is substantiated by Chinese research materials including the joint publication of a book on the history of *nanmu* by the “*Nanmu Studio*” and the Palace Museum entitled *Meicheng zaijiu: jinsinan zhimei* 美成在久—金丝楠之美 (“Time-vested Beauty: The Elegance of Golden Shimmering Nanmu”).⁵⁸⁹

Alongside *nanmu*, *jichimu*, *zitan*, *hongmu* and *huanghuali* were also referenced by Von Harringa as highly valued Chinese cabinet woods. However, despite the discussion on *nanmu* in Von Harringa’s manuscript, the greater part of the furniture in the Kullgren collection was made in *huanghuali*, with several pieces in *jichimu*. The collection and its provenance are detailed in the articles and photographs of the LACMA exhibition and the 1958 Parke-Bernet auction catalogue. Most of the furniture subscribes to the classical aesthetic and has since been resold at auction, with the LACMA exhibition and Parke-Bernet sale serving as legitimising provenance. The most representative items from the collection

⁵⁸⁶ Ernst von Harringa. *The John F. Kullgren Collection. Furniture of the Ming Dynasty*. Unpublished treatise. Parke-Bernet Galleries Inc. 1958. *Rare Chinese Furniture; Porcelain and Pottery, Jades and Ivories from Various Sources Including the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. John. F. Kullgren*. 4-5 December 1958. New York: Parke-Bernet.

⁵⁸⁷ Letter from C. Von de Burg to Anthony Williams, Fellowship of Friends, Apollo, CA. Dated 28 May 1993. Kullgren Archives.

⁵⁸⁸ Samuel Wells Williams. 1861. *The Middle Kingdom: A Survey of the Geography, Government, Education, Social Life, Arts, Religion, Etc., Of the Chinese Empire and Its Inhabitants*. 4th ed. New York: J. Wiley. 452. Accessed 21 July 2023. <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/57868/pg57868-images.html>

⁵⁸⁹ 楠书房编 *Nan shu fang bian*. (Compiled by the Nanmu Study). 2012. *Meicheng zai jiu — Jin si nan zhi mei*. 美成在久—金丝楠之美 *Time-Vested Beauty: The Elegance of Gold-Shimmering Nanmu*. Beijing: Forbidden City Press.

are a pair of *jichimu* cabinets with open mitred fretwork panels, (Figure 4.9) a set of eight *huanghuali* chairs without arms and a small *huanghuali* table with carved central fuchsia decoration (Figure 4.10). Each of these items was reputedly obtained by Kullgren directly from imperial sources. According to the Parke-Bernet sale catalogue, the *jichimu* fretwork cupboards were taken from the imperial summer palace in Jehol where they stood in a room with similar fretwork decoration. Ownership preceding Kullgren's is cited as General Tang Yulin (1877-1937), a warlord who "ruled the province of Jehol until the Japanese occupation in 1934."⁵⁹⁰ The small *huanghuali* table is similarly described as having been procured from an agent who transacted with Tang Yulin.⁵⁹¹ The set of eight side chairs were described as "undoubtedly... from the imperial palace" having been reputedly owned by descendants of statesman Yuan Shikai 袁世凯 (1859-1976).⁵⁹² These historical details, combined with Kullgren's diplomatic office and reputed engagement with the American military suggest that these pieces were procured from Chinese government sources rather than through antique dealers in Beijing. If these pieces did in fact originate from the palaces in Jehol and Beijing, then the stylistic segregation between imperial and literati furniture constructed by Ecke and Kates in distinguishing 'palace' from domestic furniture may be regarded as questionable since it is clear that furniture in the classical aesthetic was present in the imperial palaces in China.

Photographs accompanying Norman-Wilcox's article in the *Quarterly* show items on display at LACMA in the museum setting with what appear to be modern Chinese embroidered silk wall hangings as contextualising cultural evidence of the cultural and geographic origins of the exhibited pieces. As Figures 4.9 and 4.10 show, furniture items were exhibited was displayed unmounted at floor level and without barriers or partition from the audience. In contrast, the exhibition of George Kates' furniture in the Brooklyn Museum in 1946 (previously described at page 97 and referenced at pages 107 and 167) shows furniture elevated on plinths at the side of the room or freestanding in the centre, with small descriptive plaques placed in front of pieces on display accompanied by framed woodblock prints from the Spencer collection on the walls. (Figure 2.1) This form of presentation is more closely correlated with typical museum display methods, creating a physical and consequential psychological divide between the object, elevating and underscoring the significance of the exhibited subject matter.

⁵⁹⁰ Parke-Bernet, *Rare Chinese Furniture*, 84.

⁵⁹¹ Parke-Bernet, *Rare Chinese Furniture*, 91.

⁵⁹² Parke-Bernet, *Rare Chinese Furniture*, 78.

The commercial success of the Drummond brothers, Robert and William, in distributing both antique and replica Chinese furniture in the classical style has been described at pages 77, 72 and 200 and the inclusion of furniture in *Chinese Domestic Furniture* and *Chinese Household Furniture* noted at pages 76 and 80 respectively. Providing an early promotional platform. William Drummond's Chinese hardwood furniture was exhibited at the Baltimore Museum of Art between June and December of 1946. (Figure 4.11) Images of the exhibition show an extensive and varied range of furniture items in the Museum's classical high ceilinged gallery space, well-lit and elegantly arranged with Chinese porcelains, rugs and other Chinese art objects. An article by Jeanne Chapman which appeared in the JCCFS in 1993 states that Drummond lent the museum thirty-four pieces of furniture, of which twenty-five were in *huanghuali*, alongside "pewter, lacquered leather boxes, porcelains, wall hangings, five seventeenth and eighteenth-century carpets, and twenty-seven scroll paintings and rubbings."⁵⁹³ In each of the exhibitions at LACMA (Kullgren), the Brooklyn Museum (Kates) and the Baltimore Museum (Drummond), the setting and configuration of the exhibition space became increasingly sophisticated and contextualised with additional art forms whilst progressively enhancing the physical separation of space between viewer and object, suggestive of the perceived importance of the items on display. The applicability of classical Chinese furniture objects to modernist aesthetic principles and mid-century American interiors was conspicuous in the display of furniture within sparse museum interiors. It is likely that this fact would have been evident to a new generation of commercially and aesthetically astute dealers who recognised not only the fundamental concepts of beauty and craftsmanship but also the congruity between antique classical Chinese furniture and modern art and architecture.

Susan Pearce and Donald Preziosi have presented theoretical sociocultural frameworks for analysis of the transition of objects created for use in the domestic environment by non-native societies to display in the sanctified space of the museum. Pearce's theory relates to the eternality of the object which represents a past from which time creates increasing and infinite distance, experienced by the individual through the macro cultural lens of historical perception.⁵⁹⁴ According to Pearce, collected objects symbolise human experience and memory onto which the viewer, whether in the museum or in the domestic space, layers their own subjective interpretation informed by individualised and different cultural values. Transporting domestically oriented objects such as furniture items

⁵⁹³ Jeanne Chapman. "The Baltimore Museum's 1946 Exhibition of Chinese Furniture". *Journal of the Classical Chinese Furniture Society*. 3:3. Summer 1993.67-70. 67.

⁵⁹⁴ Susan M. Pearce. "Objects as meaning: or narrating the past". In Susan Pearce, ed. *Interpreting Objects and Collections*. 1994. London: Routledge.

which have extensive physical contact in the course of use, to a space designed to educate and exhibit the historical and cultural practice of an external culture, transforms both the semaphoric value and the purpose of the object. As Clunas has commented, in recasting furniture as an object of study whether as art or ethnography, “notions of function must largely be removed from the objects of the exercise.”⁵⁹⁵ Preziosi’s perspectives on the educative value presumed to be a consistent and inherent attribute of institutional museum display is in actuality subject to the “experiential reality [in which] the museum setting conjures up the ‘past’ using theatrical techniques.”⁵⁹⁶ In his analysis of the role of the museum curator in creating art, Boris Groys has asked: “What is an object? The answer that present-day art practices offer to this question is straightforward: the artwork is an exhibited object.”⁵⁹⁷ In other words, the act of placing objects on display elevates them to the status of artwork over utility. Each of these theories has clear resonance with the exhibition, collecting and institutional display of Chinese furniture

The 1955 auction sale of Kates’ furniture collection in New York through auction house Parke-Bernet caught the attention of collectors and established a benchmark for valuing hardwood furniture as an emerging field of Chinese art or exotica. Ellsworth’s memoirs record that in the 1950s, Boney began selling Chinese furniture and Japanese textiles and robes to interior decorators and private clients who planned to adapt and remodel pieces to better accord with Western lifestyles and decorating trends.⁵⁹⁸ The propensity of buyers and decorators to permanently modify the form of furniture items, often by cutting short the legs of tables, indicates that in the mid-century, Chinese furniture was still regarded as being of decorative or exotic interest requiring adaptation to the custom of a dominant acquisitive culture rather than intrinsic value as a category of Chinese art.⁵⁹⁹ Even in the 1970s, Chinese furniture was often sold as an adjunct to higher valued art forms such as porcelain and paintings by firms such as Gracie and Ralph M. Chait in New York, and Gump’s in San Francisco and Honolulu. These firms typically sold Chinese antiques alongside European imports where they were regarded as objects for interior design rather

⁵⁹⁵ Craig Clunas. 1998. “China in Britain: The Imperial Collections.” *Colonialism and the Object: Material Culture, and the Museum*. Ed. Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn. London; New York; Routledge. doi:10.4324/9780203350683. Accessed 23.05.2021.

⁵⁹⁶ Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago. 2018. *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge. 106.

⁵⁹⁷ Boris Groys. 2008. *Art Power*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 98.

⁵⁹⁸ See Ellsworth, *Discovery*, 51.

⁵⁹⁹ Stacey Pierson has written extensively of the adaptation of Chinese ceramics to align with foreign standards of taste, citing the Lennard Cup as an example. Stacey Pierson. 2013. *From Object to Concept: Global Consumption and the Transformation of Ming Porcelain*. Hong Kong University Press. 45-46.

than works of art.⁶⁰⁰ Simpler ‘Ming-style’ furniture (as opposed to decorative later ‘Qing style’ pieces) were often used for display rather than ascribed with significant intrinsic value. Correspondence between Ellsworth and Sickman in the NAMA Archives relating to a Chinese chair at Ralph M. Chait’s shop in New York additionally demonstrates the symbiotic relationship between museums and dealer connoisseurs, indicating that by the 1970s, the value of these pieces was beginning to be recognised by a small number of actors in the cultural sphere:

Went to see the chair... I examined it very closely and although the colour is very dark I think it’s *huang-hua-li* underneath. The stain job is obviously a late Western addition. The soft seat looks to be the original. The condition of the lacquer under the chair would substantiate this assumption. The piece of *dali-shih* in the splat was purposely curved to fit in the back of the chair.⁶⁰¹

3. Permanent collections of Chinese furniture in American public museums

As the Norweb collection of George Kates’ furniture at the Cleveland Museum of Art demonstrates, increased awareness of Chinese furniture through the dissemination of early historiographic literature and the exhibitions at LACMA, Brooklyn and Baltimore, led to permanent accessions within public museums in America. From the 1970s the development of a market for Chinese classical furniture transported from Beijing to America by early collectors and the emergence of specialist dealers as items began to establish a level of economic value at auction and through private sales. Whilst the Norweb collection, accessioned to the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art in 1955, provides an early example, it consisted of five pieces purchased at the sale of Kates’ furniture at Parke-Bernet auction house in the same year, concurrent to a larger acquisition of Chinese porcelain, paintings and other works of art. Although the furniture pieces in the Cleveland collection have since been joined by others, a summary review of the formation of Chinese furniture collections in the NAMA; the MMA and the MIA provide prescient examples of institutional

⁶⁰⁰ Ralph M. Chait, Gump’s and Gracie sold Oriental art and decorative artefacts with differing degrees of specialism and quality to an upmarket clientele. Ralph Chait’s gallery in New York opened in 1910, selling fine Chinese imperial and export porcelain. Gump’s originated in San Francisco in 1861 selling imported decorative items with later branches in New York and Honolulu. Gracie established in 1898 in New York selling chinoiserie style hand painted wallpaper alongside antique Chinese furniture and lacquer pieces.

⁶⁰¹ Letter from Ellsworth to Sickman, 21 February 1973. RG02; Dept of Oriental Art. Series I.L.S. A. Correspondence. Ellsworth, R. H. 1968-1973 2:31 (Box 2 file 31). Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Archives.

collections in America. These collections each represent a different method of formation and demonstrate the interdependency between collector, curator and dealer in the process of conception and actualisation. The Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, no longer in existence, is also considered here in view of its importance in promoting an international discourse between American and Chinese researchers in Chinese furniture and elevating appreciation, valuation and interest, notably after its dissolution at auction in 1996.

The Chinese furniture collections at the NAMA in Kansas City were one of the earliest institutional collections of Chinese hardwood furniture in America. (Details relevant to the establishment of the collection by Laurence Sickman are referenced on pages 19,53, 82-83, 126 of this thesis). The Chinese furniture collection is installed in specialist furniture galleries which opened in 1961, designed by the modernist architect John Yeon (1910-1994) whose own collection of oriental art was later gifted to the Portland Art Museum. Laurence Sickman both as curator of oriental art and later Director of the museum, remained the driving force behind the collection which was ostensibly motivated by Sickman's personal experience of Chinese furniture in China during the 1930s, beginning with the purchase of lacquer furniture in Beijing, as entries in Sickman's accounting book show.⁶⁰² A photograph in the Museum's archive of a *jichimu kang* table in Sickman's own collection demonstrates the quality of items acquired during his time in China.⁶⁰³ (Figure 4.12) The NAMA collection is relatively unusual in being presented together with a minimal use of modern textiles, specially made for the purpose of achieving greater proximity to an authentic display. As previously noted in this thesis, (at page 76 and footnote 165) correspondence in the Museum's archives indicate the cost and effort which Sickman expended on procuring silk textiles in the correct historic weave to be hung on the museum's famous *huanghuali* tester bed. (Figure 1.13).

The Chinese furniture in the NAMA collection was actively and intentionally formed over a period of around four decades following Sickman's original purchases for the Museum in Beijing. The most critical additions to the collection took place in 1946, with the purchase of Otto Burchard's collection which was transported from Beijing to America; followed by the purchase of items from James P. Speer in 1964 which included the acquisition of the *huanghuali* tester bed. (Figure 1.13) The further acquisition of Charlotte Horstmann's personal collection occurred in 1972. The Museum's archives contain significant correspondence and records of the acquisition and purchase of these collections.

⁶⁰² See page 125, footnote 339.

⁶⁰³ MS001 Laurence Sickman Papers V Scholarly Activities Box 33a:21. Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Archives.

The sale of Otto Burchard's collection in 1946 included twelve pieces of furniture, wood unspecified, purchased for a total sum of US\$ 8,000.00. These pieces are characterised by a large *huanghuali* couch with foliate lattice-work sides which may have been constructed from parts of an earlier object, and a pair of *huanghuali* round backed chairs in bamboo style, currently on display in the furniture galleries. (Figure 4.13) Whilst correspondence in the NAMA Archives demonstrates the warmth of the friendship between Sickman and Burchard, the twelve pieces of furniture acquired by the museum appear not to have been of the level of workmanship of the items later purchased from Speer and Horstmann, indicating that the quality of the collection evolved with its expansion. Sickman and Burchard had worked closely together during their years living in Beijing and Sickman had purchased from him many Chinese works of art which are still in the NAMA collections. Burchard's collection was shipped to America labelled for customs and tax purposes as household items rather than commercial goods suggesting that they had been formerly used in his house in Beijing.⁶⁰⁴

Sickman's acquisition of items from Speer in 1964 commenced with a letter mistakenly addressed to Alan Priest at the Museum in Kansas.⁶⁰⁵ The letter enclosed a photo of the tester bed, which had been illustrated in *Chinese Domestic Furniture* and with which Sickman was evidently familiar. Speer noted that he had purchased the bed from Sidney Cooper and that his neighbour in Peking, Julia Krenz, had informed him that Alan Priest, the curator of the Kansas City Museum, may be interested in it if he decided to dispose of the bed and other furniture items. Sickman's reply was swift and affirmative, and he offered to pay transportation to the museum if the item could first be taken on loan, as was the usual practice during acquisitions.⁶⁰⁶ A list of furniture from the Speer collection in the NAMA Archives (apparently compiled by Speer) references an item purchased from Yang Yao: "Three-drawer low cabinet [sic]. This piece was purchased from Mr. Yang who did the drawings for Ecke's book. It is a fine example with beautiful brass fittings."⁶⁰⁷ Most of the items purchased from Speer's collections were constructed in *huanghuali* and demonstrate superior craftsmanship, aligned to the classical ideal, exemplified by a pierced sided altar table still on display in the galleries. (Figure 4.14)

⁶⁰⁴ Letter from Berta Burchard to Sickman dated 22 October 1946. Burchard, Otto, 1946. File — Box MSS001.1a: Series I, Folder 26. Nelson Atkins Museum of Art Archives.

⁶⁰⁵ Letter from James Speer to Kansas City Museum, 16 July 1962. RG02 Dept of Oriental Art: Series I.L.S-A Correspondence. Speer, James. 1963-1967. Nelson Atkins Museum of Art Archives.

⁶⁰⁶ Letter from Sickman to James Speer, 19 July 1963. RG02 Dept of Oriental Art: Series I.L.S-A Correspondence. Speer, James. 1963-1967. Nelson Atkins Museum of Art Archives

⁶⁰⁷ List of furniture items from James Speer, undated. The record indicates that this item was accessioned under object number 64-4/7. RG02 Dept of Oriental Art: Series I.L.S-A Correspondence. Speer, James. 1963-1967.

The final acquisition of scale by Sickman of a fully formed furniture collection was purchased from the dealer Charlotte Horstmann in 1972. Horstmann was a well-known commercial dealer and had operated galleries in Beijing and Hong Kong. Correspondence in the NAMA Archives indicate a close professional relationship between Sickman and Horstmann: Sickman requisitioned replacement hardware for the furniture in the collection and commissioned other objects from Horstmann for display purposes.⁶⁰⁸ In 1971, Sickman wrote to Horstmann of the perceived importance of Ellsworth's book, speculating as to whether it would increase the value of Chinese furniture, indicating limited valuations in comparison with European furniture:

It will, as you say, somewhat affect the value of Chinese furniture, but I do not think to a really considerable extent. The market is still limited and in no way comparable to that of French or English furniture of the late 18th century, nor do I believe will it ever reach anywhere near the value of the latter.⁶⁰⁹

In the same correspondence, Sickman offered "\$125,000 for the group" in relation to Horstmann collection, some \$5,000-\$10,000 less than her requested price and suggesting that Ellsworth act as a "middleman" during a forthcoming trip to Asia.⁶¹⁰ Sickman had opened negotiations for the acquisition in September 1971 with a letter stating that he was familiar with the items in Horstmann's collection having visited her apartment and as many items were published in Ellsworth's book.⁶¹¹ Exemplifying this connection, a *huanghuali* couch belonging to Horstmann and featured in Ellsworth remains on display in the NAMA Chinese furniture galleries.⁶¹² (Figure 4.15)

The formation of the NAMA collection was orchestrated both systematically and opportunistically over a period of around forty years, driven largely by Sickman's singular collecting vision. The acquisition of Speer's pieces, which included the *huanghuali* candlesticks flanking the couch in Figure 4.15 was serendipitous, whereas the purchase of Horstmann's collection was instigated intentionally by Sickman ten years after the opening

⁶⁰⁸ See, for example letters from Charlotte Horstmann to Laurence Sickman dated 6 July and 19 August, 1964. RG02 Dept of Oriental Art: Series I.L.S-A Correspondence. Horstmann, Charlotte 1958-72 4.4. Nelson Atkins Museum of Art Archives.

⁶⁰⁹ Sickman to Horstmann, 28 December 1971. RG02 Dept of Oriental Art: Series I.L.S-A Correspondence. Horstmann, Charlotte 1958-72 4.4. Nelson Atkins Museum of Art Archives.

⁶¹⁰ Sickman to Horstmann, 28 December 1971.

⁶¹¹ Laurence Sickman to Charlotte Horstmann. Letter dated 1 September 1971. RG02 Dept of Oriental Art: Series I.L.S-A Correspondence. Horstmann, Charlotte 1958-72 4.4. Nelson Atkins Museum of Art Archives.

⁶¹² Ellsworth, *Chinese Furniture: Hardwood Examples*. Item 36, 246.

of the Museum's specially designed furniture galleries. The collection at the NAMA set both a precedent and point of departure in the application of exhibition methods which would be varied in later public museum displays at the MMA and the MIA. The exhibited collections at both institutions reflect the singular vision of an instigative collector whilst attempting to present furniture in a transportive setting representative of the vernacular Chinese built environment.

The Astor Chinese Garden Court and the Ming Room (Figure 4.16) at the MMA in New York were conceived and constructed according to a proposal and design by Brook Astor (as patron), Wen Fong, Professor of Chinese at Princeton University and consultant to the MMA, and Arthur Rosenblatt, Director of Planning at the MMA.⁶¹³ The furniture in the Ming Room was acquired by the Museum from Robert Ellsworth whose contribution to the historiography and collecting focus on Chinese furniture and ability to navigate the institutional, private and academic spheres has been described in detail in Chapter Two (see pages 115-129). According to an article published by the *New York Times* in 1979, the construction of the Astor Court Chinese Garden and Ming Room which opened in 1981, twenty years later than the furniture galleries at the NAMA, represented the act of first cultural diplomacy to take place between America and China since the political "opening up" of China in 1978.⁶¹⁴ The Garden and Ming Room were designed to create an immersive environment which displayed Ellsworth's Chinese hardwood furniture in a setting approximating its original context. Authenticity of display and workmanship were regarded as necessary elements in the quest for credibility and experiential veracity: workmen were brought to New York from Suzhou and Hong Kong to install the Chinese Garden and the furniture in the Ming Room. Within this grandiose vision, the furniture was integrated into an immersive setting illustrating the structural and spatial relationship between furniture and architecture.

At the MIA, a superlative collection of Chinese furniture was formed between 1991 and 1997 by art collectors and philanthropists Ruth Stricker Dayton (1935-2020) and Bruce Dayton (1918-2015). Working with Robert Jacobsen, (1944-2021) Curator of Asian Art at the MIA, the Daytons constructed a collection of seventy-five pieces of Chinese furniture following first-hand visits to China (first referenced on page 139). Nicholas Grindley, who supplied the first piece of furniture to enter the collection to Bruce Dayton, before which

⁶¹³ Alfreda Murch, and Wen Fong. "A Chinese Garden Court: The Astor Court at the Metropolitan Museum of Art." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 38, no. 3 (1980): 3-64.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3269268>.

⁶¹⁴ Richard Shepard. "Metropolitan to get Ming Court and Garden Room." *New York Times*, 17 January 1979. <https://nyti.ms/40rXJ6N>

time “the MIA had no Chinese furniture. He then proceeded to collect furniture for the MIA, the collection was formed with the help and guidance of Robert (Bob) Jacobsen, and eventually amassed the largest, and arguably, the most important collection of Chinese furniture in the US.”⁶¹⁵ Whilst the majority of these pieces were in *huanghuali* and conformed to the classical ideal, the collection which was intended for display in the museum, was designed to be representative rather than to reflect the personal tastes of the collectors, and included lacquer pieces and a *nanmu* Liao dynasty table described as “one of the few examples of pre-Yuan Chinese furniture in the West.”⁶¹⁶ In addition to furniture, Jacobsen and the Daytons acquired original interiors in China which were installed in the museum to create a sense of authenticity and provide a cultural framework through which to experience the collected furniture items. See, for example, the Studio of Gratifying Discourse at Figure 4.17 and the Wu Family Reception Hall at Figure 4.18 which were both transported from their original location in China to be installed in the galleries at the MIA. An article in the *New York Times* describes the process of acquiring the scholar’s studio and Ming reception hall from an area near Suzhou and planning a space in which to display the furniture, stemming from a desire expressed by Dayton to present the collected items “in context.”⁶¹⁷

Notably, a number of *huanghuali* items in the MIA collection were purchased from the former collection of the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture in Apollo, California, at auction in 1996. This included a large screen in *tieli* wood, *huanghuali* and marble which was one of the centre pieces of the Christie’s sale in 1996 and now stands in the MIA. (Figure 4.19a and 4.19b). Opened in 1990, the Museum which was not licensed for public access, was housed in a single story, neoclassical building. The collection was formed by Robert Burton, (1938-) the leader of a charismatic quasi-religious organisation, and commenced with the purchase of a *zitan* armchair at an antique shop in Paris. Burton collaborated with dealers and scholars in China and America to simultaneously research and procure the best pieces of Chinese classical furniture. Handler, who was employed as a curator at the Museum has recorded the museum’s collecting criteria as requiring “high quality of materials and craftsmanship, good condition, authenticity and aesthetic excellence.”⁶¹⁸ Underscoring the connection between research and collecting, the Museum published the *Journal of The Classical Chinese Furniture Society* on a quarterly basis with

⁶¹⁵ Email from Nicholas Grindley to author, 15 August 2024.

⁶¹⁶ Jacobsen, *Classical Chinese Furniture in the Minneapolis Institute of Art*, No. No. 25, 89.

⁶¹⁷ Rita Reif. “Far From China but Completely at Home.” *New York Times*. 20 September 1998. Accessed 10 August 2024. <https://nyti.ms/3YHRII9>.

⁶¹⁸ Sarah Handler. 1996. “The Coming Into Light of an Old Art” in: Curtis Evarts (ed.) *Masterpieces from the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture*. San Francisco: China Arts Foundation. xxi.

contributions from Handler, Evarts and guest writers, the contents of which was often focused on items in the Museum's own collection.

Emphasising the internalisation of scholarship which followed the instatement of China's "open door" policy in 1978, Wang Shixiang was consulted for his advice on each addition to the Museum's collection and made several visits to California, providing the foreword for a Chinese edition of a catalogue of the Museum's collection which was published in 1997.⁶¹⁹ As with his own publications, Wang expressed sentiments relative to the export of China's indigenous furniture heritage in his native language which did not appear in English, articulating regret that his own books had resulted in the distribution abroad of furniture pieces, including by smugglers.⁶²⁰ In addition, Wang was disappointed by the relatively swift sale of the Museum's collection in 1996, less than a decade after its establishment, reputedly to satisfy a loan from the Bank of Canton. The collection was sold by Christies in September 1996 at a total value of US\$11,200,000.⁶²¹ This figure contrasts with a valuation of US\$25,000,000 provided in newspaper reports advertising the exhibition of the collection at the Pacific Heritage Museum in San Francisco, held between September 1995 and March 1996.⁶²² As the Pacific Heritage Museum was also owned by the Bank of Canton, it seems likely that the exhibition was in preparation for sale and conceivable that ebullient valuations had outpaced the Museum's ability to keep up payments, forcing a sale. In *Mingshi Jiaju Cuizhen*, Wang articulated a concern that the pieces in the Museum's collection would be purchased by Chinese collectors in Taiwan and America and continually distributed abroad, rather than returning back to the Chinese mainland:

"Finally, I would like to express my concern about the ownership of this collection of furniture. It is said that after the change of ownership, many pieces will be owned by Chinese people living in the United States and Taiwan . I sincerely hope that as many of these artistic treasures left by our ancestors can be preserved in the hands of descendants of the Han Chinese people, the more preserved, the better! The more the better!"⁶²³

4. The formation of public collections of Chinese furniture in China

⁶¹⁹ Wang, *Mingshi Jiaju Cuizhen*, vii-viii.

⁶²⁰ See footnote 381, page 168 and Wang, *Mingshi Jiaju Cuizhen*, vii-viii.

⁶²¹ Wendy Moonan. "Antiques: The Interest in Furniture from China." *New York Times*. 19 September 1997. Accessed 11 August 2024. <https://nyti.ms/3Ut0dhr>

⁶²² Unattributed, *The San Francisco Examiner*. 9 June 1995. 57. Accessed 2 August 2024. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/461915688>.

⁶²³ Wang, *Mingshi Jiaju Cuizhen*, viii. Original text in Appendix 1.

Wang's engagement with the collection at the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture provides substantive evidence for both the internationalisation of the subject matter and growth of interest among scholars in China. The condition of the art market in China was central to collecting tendencies during the twentieth century, underpinning the circulation and availability of items within China and globally. In post-imperial Republican China (1912-1949), delineating an unbroken historicizing narrative was considered fundamental to validating political and cultural authority which transcended governmental structures. During this period established Qing families such as Duanfang's were compelled by diminished finances to liquidate their collections. For the city's expatriate residents, shopping for antiques in Beijing was, by contemporary accounts, an enjoyable and prolific past time.⁶²⁴ Li Ma has assessed the impact of China's economic circumstances on art collecting tendencies subsequent to the formation of the PRC, noting that the destruction of private property rights between the mid-century and Den Zhaoping's economic reforms in the late 1970s prevented the operation of any kind of working art market in China.⁶²⁵ During this period, the art market in China became predominantly a state controlled affair.⁶²⁶ Ma points out that a ten year period passed after the economic opening up to the west before sufficient wealth was accumulated to sustain an efficient market for art in China, noting that the market reflects the conditioning of current and past international relations with art works on sale in the West being repatriated to China by patriotic collectors.⁶²⁷ This ten year period (1980-1990) coincides with the maturation of the market for Chinese furniture which took place concurrently in China and the West.

The Shanghai Museum was the first public art institution to open in China following the establishment of the PRC. Wang Shixiang's collection of seventy-nine pieces of Chinese furniture was sold to the Shanghai Museum in 1999 where it is exhibited together with twenty pieces of furniture from Chen Mengjia's collection. (Figure 4.20) The importance of Chen's collection and suggested motivation which stemmed from an assumed awareness of the exhibitions of the Kullgren, Kates and Drummond collections at American public museums which took place during his sojourn in America are discussed in detail at pages

⁶²⁴ See Susan Naquin, "Paul Houo 霍明志, A Dealer in Antiquities in Early Twentieth Century Peking." *Études Chinoises* XXXIV-2 (2015) 203-244. 219-221. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108283830.007>.

⁶²⁵ Li Ma. 2003. *China's Art Market since 1978: Regional Entrepreneurship and Global Impact*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.13

⁶²⁶ Denise Y. Ho. "Antiquity in revolution: The Shanghai Museum". In: *Curating Revolution: Politics on Display in Mao's China*. Cambridge Studies in the History of the People's Republic of China. Cambridge University Press; 2017:211-247. 2019-221. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108283830.007>. Accessed 18.03.2023.

⁶²⁷ Ma, *China's Art Market*, 13-15.

164-169 of this thesis. The process of the Museum's negotiation to acquire the collection from Zhao Luori's family was described by Fang Jixiao in *Chen Mengjia he ta de Pengyoumen*, as the family were aware of the value of the collection and had planned a liquidation at auction.⁶²⁸ Wang wrote in the introductory section of a book published to commemorate the launch of the new Chinese furniture galleries of his preference for the collection he had built over four decades to remain intact and on public display, characterising the collection as part of the common heritage of the Chinese people.⁶²⁹ Dualistic concepts of nationalism and individualism are inherent in the display of Wang and Chen's furniture in the Shanghai museum. As James Cuno states: "National culture is always a political construction. It is a fixed concept coincident with the cultural identity the nation's ruling forces claim for themselves and the nation."⁶³⁰ Wang's views on the criticality of preserving China's furniture heritage were clearly communicated, including in his statement expressing "shame that Chinese Museums [previously] had no such collections" whilst they existed in museums abroad.⁶³¹ At the same time, the furniture in the collection remains closely associated with Wang, who was often photographed in his apartment in Beijing seated at the inscribed *zitan* painting table shown in Figure 4.20. The positioning of this table in the exhibition hall is intended to suggest the ongoing presence of its former owner.

The theme of continued associations of specific items of furniture with individual collectors is inherent in the furniture collections at both the Tsinghua University Art Museum (清华大学艺术博物馆, *Qinghua Daxue Yishu Bowuguan*) in Beijing and at Prince Gong's Palace (恭亲王府, *Guqinwang Fu*) which adjoins the Forbidden City. Ecke's importance in creating what I describe as an "apotheosized" or superlative collection of furniture through including in *Chinese Domestic Furniture* and his influence in sustaining the taste for a distinct strand and classification of Chinese furniture have been described at pages 77 and 194. The *huanghuali* table exhibited in the Tsinghua Art Museum, shown in the foreground of the Figure 4.21, was illustrated in photographs and line drawings and described by Ecke in *Chinese Domestic Furniture*.⁶³² In an interview in 2010, Tseng Yuho referenced the storage of Ecke's furniture in the British and German Embassies for safe keeping during the second Sino-Japanese War and its subsequent disappearance, noting that only a portion of

⁶²⁸ Fang, *Chen Mengjia*, 475.

⁶²⁹ Wang Shixiang, "Introduction," 13-14. In Quincy Chang (ed.). 1998. *The Chuang Family Bequest of Fine Ming and Qing Furniture in the Shanghai Museum*. Hong Kong: The Woods Publishing Company.

⁶³⁰ Cuno, James. 2010. *Who Owns Antiquity?: Museums and the Battle over Our Ancient Heritage*. Princeton University Press. ProQuest Ebook Central.
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/detail.action?docID=726050>.

⁶³¹ Wang Shixiang, "Introduction," *The Chuang Family Bequest*, 14.

⁶³² Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, Item 14, Plates 15-17.

the furniture was eventually recovered and returned to Ecke in Hawaii.⁶³³ (As noted at pages 17-18, the Ecke's had relocated to Honolulu in 1948). The table in the Tsinghua collection (Figure 4.21) is understood to have been in a state warehouse for cultural relics and regarded as state property before being displayed in the Museum. Seven items of *huanghuali* furniture from Ecke's collection which featured in *Chinese Domestic Furniture* were gifted by Tseng to the Chinese state in 2007 and are exhibited in one of the small courtyard houses in Prince Gong's palace where Ecke taught classes in the 1930s and where he and Tseng were married. The small waisted *huanghuali* table with curvilinear braces shown in Figure 4.22 was gifted as one of the seven items by Tseng Yuho. Its return to China was considered a patriotic gesture and may be seen as part of a wider tendency to repatriate and conserve objects representing the country's cultural heritage.

5. From classic to vernacular: CL Ma collection of lacquered furniture

The formation of private collections of furniture in the Chinese mainland has focused renewed attention on the diversity and inventiveness of China's furniture heritage. Private museums such as the Ganfu Museum, (干福博物馆, *Ganfu Bowuguan*) established by cultural personality Ma Weidu 马未都 (1941-) in Beijing in which items are arranged by wood type with the objective of comprehensive representation of China's hardwood furniture, challenge the concept of the 'classical' ideal established by the early Western collectors and historiographers. The ingenuity of Chinese lacquer furniture designs, both in the pre-Ming and Qing dynasties is evident in the collection on display at the C.L Ma Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture (可樂馬古典傢俱博物館, *Kelema Gudian Jiaju Bowuguan*) in Tianjin, China. The collection which comprises 320 pieces of furniture was inceptioned in the late 1970s and is selected from the many thousands of furniture items which C.L. Ma has viewed and purchased over decades in his capacity as a furniture dealer. Items accessioned to the Museum's collection were intentionally selected to represent a comprehensive cross-sectional overview of China's historic furniture heritage. The collection contains a number of pieces which predate the Ming dynasty, typically in lacquered softwood as exemplified by Figure 4.23. Many of these items came from Chinese

⁶³³ *Tseng Yuho koushu, Lin Minglin zhengli* 曾佑和口述, 蔭明林整理, (Interview with Tseng Yuho, compiled by Lin Minglin). 艾克先生的中国古典家具缘 *Ai Ke xiansheng de Zhongguo gudian jiaju yuan* (Tseng Yuho and Mr. Ecke's Fate with Classical Chinese Furniture. 中文参考: 紫禁城 2010.8 (增刊) 第二章 第九节 曾佑和, *Zijingcheng 2010.8 (zengkan) Di'er zhang Di jiu jie Zeng Youhe*, ("Forbidden City 2010.8" (supplement) Chapter 2 Section 9.

provinces such as Shanxi, Henan and Hebei which were further from the destructive physical ramifications of political turmoil in the capital cities.⁶³⁴

The existence of such pieces is at odds with Perceval Yett's statement that "Actual examples in our public and private collections are not numerous... probably none is older than the 14th century."⁶³⁵ This statement regarding the scarcity of surviving early pieces is expressed generally in relation to both lacquer and hardwood furniture. Whilst it is true that examples predating the Ming dynasty are notable for their rarity, Yetts and Ecke attributed the lack of early surviving hardwood furniture to the perishable nature of the material. An alternative and more likely explanation for the absence of pre-Ming hardwood furniture examples is that the vast majority of early 'fine' furniture was constructed in lacquered softwood and indigenous softwoods such as zelkova and ginko wood and that hardwood furniture production accelerated during the Ming dynasty due to the availability of imported supply and a newly affluent consumer base. Although it is true that ancient Chinese furniture predating the Ming period is not abundant, as per the examples cited above, lacquered pieces from dynasties preceding the Ming can be identified both in public and private collections in Asia and the West.

C.L. Ma, whose collection of early provincial furniture from Northwestern China and dated pieces is first referenced at page 103 of this thesis, has noted that historic buildings in Shaanxi province are better preserved and that by extension, the region has more historic furniture preserved in good condition, in part because Shaanxi is close to Inner Mongolian desert where the atmosphere is drier and less humid. It is also apparent that many of the earlier pieces, such as the altar table shown in Figure 4.23 were procured from temples where they might have remained undisturbed for several centuries, provided with protection afforded by the sanctity of the spaces they occupied. As Curtis Evarts has noted in his monograph on the C.L. Ma Collection, the Shanxi region has in excess of 400 architectural heritage structures which predate the Yuan dynasty and which are preserved under China's cultural relics laws.⁶³⁶ Given the distance between Shaanxi and Beijing (approximately 1,000 kilometres) it is likely that the early collectors and exponents of Chinese hardwood furniture in Beijing would have been unaware of the rich furniture history in the further northwestern provinces. According to Ma, "Shanxi furniture can also be considered to be representative of Chinese traditional furniture."⁶³⁷ His collecting activity is distinguished from the

⁶³⁴ Evarts, *CL Ma Traditional Chinese Furniture*, 9.

⁶³⁵ Yetts, "Concerning Chinese Furniture", 126.

⁶³⁶ Evarts, *C.L. Ma Traditional Chinese Furniture*, 23.

⁶³⁷ Evarts, *C.L. Ma, Traditional Chinese Furniture*, 7.

collection formed by Nancy Berliner in Shaanxi (referenced on page 134-5) and published in the *Friends of the House* exhibition catalogue, which considered furniture from an anthropological perspective, in use and in situ, employed for everyday purposes. It is evident that Berliner's collecting approach was also as a factor of cost constrained to quotidian pieces and that her objective was not to seek out items of rarity or artistic and cultural merit. In contrast, Ma's collection seeks to encompass the diversity, creativity and construction techniques of ancient furniture in China and to exceed the narrow approach to collecting defined by the early Western collectors in Beijing.

The preface to Curtis Ewart's book on C.L. Ma's collection, which was written by Wang Shixiang, suggested that three categories of furniture existed: those similar to *huanghuali* pieces; similar to *huanghuali* in structure but with further decorative elements; and a third category entirely unrelated to *huanghuali* in both structure and finish.⁶³⁸ The continued reference to *huanghuali* classical furniture suggests a benchmark for further classification and organisation. The dated furniture pieces in the C.L. Ma collection provide examples on which to base further scientific and cultural analysis rather than aesthetic analysis of furniture development in China. For example, the Ming-dynasty portable lunch box with foldaway legs on display in the museum (Figure 4.24a) demonstrates that lacquered furniture reflected the consistent use of designs from early dynasties, through reference to a Tang dynasty tomb engraving (Figure 4.24b) made approximately one thousand years earlier in 631.⁶³⁹ Viewing Chinese furniture through an inclusive cultural lens provides greater opportunity to achieve a more historically accurate understanding of the artistic and anthropological circumstances and conditions relative to China's furniture heritage. By reconsidering established ideas around materials and designs and departing from precedent forms, craftsmanship, innovation and historic significance become central to an evaluation of the individual merits of furniture objects as the collection in the C.L. Ma museum exemplifies.

⁶³⁸ Ewarts, *C.L. Ma, Traditional Chinese Furniture*, 18-9.

⁶³⁹ Ewarts, *C.L. Ma*, Item 107. Yang, Zhishui 扬之水. 2015. *Tang Song Jiaju Xunwei* 唐宋家具寻微 (A look at the furniture of the Tang and Song Dynasties). Hong Kong Open Page Publishing Company Limited. 103.

CONCLUSION

Wealth is a condition of art. No society develops art until it gets rich.

The proposition is subject to qualifications and even to seeming exceptions, but its general validity is too obvious to require argument.

H.H. Powers, “Art and Economics,” 1925⁶⁴⁰

The disposal of Robert Ellsworth’s personal collection in New York in 2015 by the auction house Christie’s following his death a year earlier was widely publicised, not only for the impact on valuations and desirability effected by the attachment of Ellsworth’s provenance to works of art, but also for the high prices paid by Chinese collectors to purchase items of their country’s heritage. Images of Chinese furniture and artworks on display in Ellsworth’s luxurious apartment in Fifth Avenue, New York, featured in sales catalogues and in the media, epitomised a sophisticated, patrician American style which transcended international boundaries of taste to appeal to a newly globalised and affluent class of elite Chinese consumers and collectors. The auction of Ellsworth’s collection embodies a number of the themes and issues critical to this thesis. The status of Chinese classical furniture and the importance of *huanghuali* presented furniture not simply as an adjunct to traditionally higher forms of art but as collectable and valuable art works within a globalised context. The dominant presence of collectors from Mainland China in the acquisition of superlative examples of Chinese furniture exceeds individual narrative to evidence soft power, state policies and national economic prowess, echoing the early collections of East Asian art amassed by American institutions in the previous century. Ellsworth’s brand, now perpetually attached to objects as provenance and permanent evidence of merit, articulates the importance of art dealers and historiographers as charismatic arbiters of desirability of broader art fields as well as of singular art works in the art ecosystem.

The proposition that art fields operate on both a micro level – that of individual craftsmen, patrons and works of art – and on a macro level, encompassing state and community and shaped by dynamic sociopolitical events and international relations, is a central proposition of material cultural studies and is foundational to many of the questions addressed in this thesis. As the analysis of collecting practices and historiography presented here evinces, concepts and beliefs regarding the value and significance of objects symbolic of national heritage and identity may be altered in contact and dialogue with extrinsic

⁶⁴⁰ H. H. Powers, “Art and Economics.” *The Art Bulletin* 8, no. 2 (1925): 105–11.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3046508>

cultures. In an increasingly globalised inter-ethnic paradigm, the exchange and acquisition of transcultural objects which are either intentionally made or later designated as artworks through their collection and display may impact interpretation in their originating context. Through the application of relevant sociological, anthropological and museum theory, the proceeding chapters describe the establishment and internationalisation of a new art historical field and category over a period of around fifty years and which continues to expand. In the case of Chinese hardwood classical furniture, the modernist architectural movement in Europe which was itself a response to the shifting social sociopolitical context, informed the aesthetic judgement, selection and acquisition of artefacts by Western expatriates living temporarily in China. The formation of a group of apotheosized objects which have been gathered, categorized and defined through historiographic texts and by the creation of provenance reinforced by museum display and the inception of a commercial market, imperceptably altered notions of value and narratives regarding cultural history and heritage.

As described in the foregoing chapters, the criticality of the written historiography in disseminating knowledge, affirming recognition and codifying a set of values associated with Chinese furniture can be traced to inception in the writing of Western authors based on personal prior collecting activity. The work of Gustav Ecke, and to a lesser extent, George Kates points to the establishment of a continuing precedent in the establishment of concepts associated with Chinese Ming and early Qing style furniture. Evidence from Ming literature and primary source materials such as the writing of Wen Zhenheng, Gao Lian and others, shows that whilst *huanghuali* and *zitan* were indeed highly prized imported cabinet woods, other types of indigenous woods such as *zelkova*, *jichimu* and *tiele* had been used over preceding centuries in the construction of fine furniture. These materials have been substantially undervalued by present collecting attitudes which are based on modern tendencies rather than historical perceptions or on factual historical evidence from within China. Moreover, China's lacquer furniture heritage has continued to develop until the present day and should be regarded as an intrinsic element in the study and estimation of the country's furniture heritage. Although archival materials are referenced to explicate social custom and stylistic developments, selection bias is apparent in the interpretation and meaning ascribed to the application of documentary sources.

The formation of a body of knowledge relevant to Chinese furniture disseminated through the literary historiography by Western scholars in the twentieth century has been shown to be instrumental in shaping ideas that continue to perpetuate and to define concepts

regarding the selection of objects considered to be representative of a national culture of furniture heritage. In documenting the establishment of a framework for assessing the selection of collectable representative furniture pieces, the historiography assumes a significant role in provenance creation and in forming narrative histories of individual objects and broader classes of furniture which may need to be substantiated or re-examined over time. This is particularly relevant where primary source materials relating to the production of individual works is limited and a modern provenance is established to substantiate authenticity. For this reason, collecting practices and the evaluation of China's furniture heritage are both founded on the work of a small number of key individuals, whose work and appreciation was the product of an internationalised discourse in response to political events which took place in China in 1949 and again after 1978. The combined historiographic contributions, collecting activities and interrelationships between Yang Yao, Gustav Ecke, Wang Shixiang and Laurence Sickman were instrumental to the formation of aesthetic judgements which combined to represent an established perspective on China's domestic furniture heritage.

As this thesis substantiates through its review of the seminal literature, the assembly of a lexicon, vocabulary and set of historical references, facilitated the crystallisation of a grouping of furniture which could be further identified, described and classified. The significance of developing benchmarking criteria against which to index the characteristics of individual works of art and furniture items demonstrates the need for systems and processes through which to recognise pieces within a field of art. Establishing recurrent characteristics enables evaluation of merit of individual pieces as well as the mapping of different types of furniture across a structure comprised of functional and decorative characteristics. In the case of Chinese furniture this categorisation includes broad division by type and function with further division and categorisation relevant to wood types, decorative schema and ornamental elements and joinery. The ability to recognise and classify art works has been shown to be a critical preoccupation of the historiography as the field developed, with the first attempts by Ecke and Yang Yao in the 1940s, and the most definitive and detailed criterion set out by Wang Shixiang in *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture* in 1990. This system of identification has been critical to the development of a structural framework against to identify and develop a relevant group of pieces which fit the designation and characteristics of 'classical' Chinese furniture. The presence and availability of an appropriate quantity of fine furniture, initially exported by expatriates returning to the West around the time of the second Sino Japanese War and before the establishment of the

PRC, and through Hong Kong after China's newly introduced economic policies in 1978 has been a significant factor in the growth of collecting.

The further attachment of a historical narrative constructed from facts which could be gathered from available source material alleviated as far as possible the absence of abundant original documentation relating to individual pieces and their manufacture or origin. The process of bringing together an anthology of fact from such sources as could be identified as described in the thesis, derived from a democratic combination of sources in support of a selective conceptual framework on which an art historical account was compiled. Evidence for historical Chinese furniture existed in the recorded oral testimony of craftsmen, as recorded by Wang Shixiang and in the *Classic of Liu Ban* as well as in Ming and Qing gazettes and commentaries, Ming literature and Song paintings. The compilation of fragmentary pieces of knowledge continued to expand during the period in which the historiography.

As noted in the Introduction, this thesis addresses a significant gap in the research in providing a comprehensive overview and analysis of the historiography of Chinese furniture together with an examination of the intrinsic connection between the historiography and collecting practice. The central research questions, themes and rationale for the thesis seek to identify a nexus of origin for the materialisation of the concepts and preferences surrounding Chinese classical furniture through analysis of the historiography and collecting practices and a consideration of the interrelationship between the two. The analysis also considers evidence of a basis for the preferences exhibited by modern collectors in historical fact which could be traced to contemporary Ming and early Qing preference demonstrated in the writing and available source material original to the period. A chronological mapping of the Western writing on Chinese furniture from the earliest works identified that the first references to Chinese furniture in European literature focused on the customary use of furniture in juxtaposition with Western habit and on the decorative surface of a Chinese bed transported to Lisbon and admired by the Portuguese monarch (those by Marco Polo and de Mendoza, written in the Yuan and Ming dynasties respectively, as cited at page 48 of this thesis). The earliest Western publications dedicated to Chinese furniture, published in the 1920s in major European cities including London and Paris demonstrate that collections of the time preferred richly decorated pieces of Chinese furniture though recognised the appeal of simplified shapes and outlines which resonated with European aesthetics and interiors of the period. Whilst these early publications demonstrated limited knowledge of Chinese culture at first hand, it is evident that from the outset, the field was cultivated by

commercial dealers whose collected pieces were featured in the plates of books published in the 1920s, and that furniture was not the domain of contemporary sinologists or historians.

As described in the first and second chapters of this thesis, greater proximity to an authentic perception of China's furniture heritage was achieved by Western scholars subsequent to the presence in Beijing of European and American scholars, including the principal historiographers and experts Ecke, Kates and Sickman, and missionaries such as a John Calvin Ferguson, whose contribution to knowledge, thought and perception of the subject matter has been set out in detail. The historical events which precipitated the establishment of delegations in Beijing, an area previously inaccessible to foreigners enabled a privileged and authentic cultural experience of China for Western expatriates present in the city prior to the second Sino-Japanese war. In the context of Chinese furniture, as this thesis establishes, this period was pivotal to the inception of an art historical field of Chinese classical furniture, which was in itself a response to extrinsic sociopolitical and economic factors relevant to both domestic and international affairs in China and abroad. A combination of the inculcation of Modernist architectural design philosophy and the social shifts on which this aesthetic movement was based bought a new relevance to the unadorned simplicity of Chinese Ming and early Qing furniture in a Western context. The exodus of expatriate collectors such as Kates and the Drummonds in the 1940s due war and civil and unrest in China provided impetus for collections to be exported to the West.

The end of the Imperial regime in China was significant in creating an environment in which fine Chinese domestic furniture could be privileged and appreciated over palace furniture. After the end of the Qing dynasty, the idealised image of the Chinese literatus, a consistent and meritocratic presence across dynasties, took on a renewed relevance in the modernisation of China. The accoutrements and furnishings of the scholar's study were made increasingly accessible to Western residents in Beijing, some of whom elected to occupy the living spaces of former Qing officials, coming into social contact with scholarly Chinese families. The sale of artworks by Qing families precipitated cultural cross-pollination resulting in collegiate relationships such as those between Ferguson and Duanfang and Ferguson and Guo Baochang. As I note in Chapter Three, the reciprocal presence of Chinese scholars in America and Europe in the first half of the twentieth century created a conscious awareness of the global milieu for valuing national heritage through museum collections and display as well as the presence of Chinese works of art, including furniture, in American public museums and institutions. Similarly, Chen Mengjia's presence in America during a period in which the Chinese hardwood furniture collections of three

American expatriates (Kullgren, Kates and Drummond) at American public museums is undoubtedly consequential to Chen's own collection and to his influence on Wang Shixiang's later collecting and historiographic works in this area.

The establishment of collections of Chinese furniture, first in public museums, such as the Shanghai Museum where Wang and Chen's collections are displayed next to each other, and more recently in the private museums promoted under Chinese state policies represent an institutionalisation of Chinese heritage appreciation and conservation. I have observed that the collection of furniture gathered by Wang Shixiang and Chen Mengjia subscribed to the aesthetics, ideals, tastes and values set out by Gustav Ecke in *Chinese Domestic Furniture* in 1942. More recently, collections referenced in this study, such as the collection of Shaanxi lacquered furniture displayed at the C.L. Ma Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture, or the Nanmu studio (referenced on page 206) have begun to take a broader and more holistic approach to Chinese furniture collecting. This extends to the presentation of individual pieces including a more conservative approach to restoration which prioritises patina, preserving physical evidence of the object's historical trajectory.

Although the work of Kates, Ecke and other historiographers, collectors and proponents of Chinese hardwood furniture established an index against which to benchmark quality, value and artistry of individual pieces which has perpetuated, it is evident that within China, new research and collections challenge existing notions of value, and that as a consequence, a revised tendency is emerging that looks beyond the narrow interpretation of Chinese furniture established during the first half of the twentieth century within the environs of Beijing. A re-evaluation of both lacquer and Qing furniture in the historiography and private museum collections in and around Beijing have established an increasingly comprehensive approach to the interpretation of China's historical furniture culture. This includes awarding equal significance to the furniture of the Qing dynasty and recognition of the fact that many of China's oldest extant furniture items from the pre-Yuan dynasties are among the most significant furniture objects and carry an extended meaning about the social practices of the cultures from which they originated. Continued examination of China's ancient furniture heritage based on research rather than the semaphoric display properties of internationalised collectable objects by reference to selective imported wood types enables an estimation of the significance of items of furniture against a comprehensive framework, reflecting a revitalised understanding of China's endemic furniture history.

This thesis poses a number of challenges and questions relative to the field of classical and heritage Chinese furniture which present opportunity for further research and development. In particular, there is significant room for synthesis of the art historical and scientific research on wood types used in Chinese furniture to bring together biological information with cultural information on the origins of woods and their use in manufacturing fine furnishings. To date, much of the scientific analysis of wood types has been conducted by Chinese scholars and has not been made available or fully explored in both languages. As is borne out by the evidence presented in this thesis, *huanghuali* and *zitan*, whilst important hardwoods for superior domestic and palace furnishings, are woods prioritised by twentieth century collectors as symbolic of value rather than by Ming patrons and connoisseurs. As noted previously, indigenous woods such as *nanmu*, *tielimu* and *hongmu* have also been used in the construction of furniture which attains equal levels of craftsmanship, but which has been overlooked because of its limited value in the art market. Whilst these formerly underappreciated woods have been the subject of private collections on the Chinese mainland, there is scope for academic study on the significance of the use of Chinese woods in fine furniture production during the Ming and early Qing dynasties. Research may also consider the correspondence between their use in architecture and furnishings which takes into account the topographical availability of these woods and distinguishes them from the imported tropical hardwoods prized by furniture collectors.

The lacquered early furniture in the C.L. Ma collection represents a class of object which occupies the space between art and anthropology. With the exception of Nancy Berliner's writing which focused on quotidian furniture in use in ordinary or indigent households rather than seeking out the artistic merits of individualistic or rare pieces, early lacquered furniture has not been studied in Western institutions and has so far not been studied comprehensively in China. As I point out, many of the earliest furniture objects in the C. L. Ma collection originated for use in temples and may explain its survival and durability. Many of the finest extant pieces of furniture in lacquer and hardwood are incense stands and altar tables for use in rites of worship or libation. Whilst objects in wood for use in the scholar's study have been subject to analysis and research due to their secular nature and affirmed status as collectibles, there may be scope for future consideration of temple furniture and accoutrements. The study of temple furniture objects from a cultural standpoint, considering the patronage and practices of temples offers rich opportunity for further research. In addition, as I note, lacquered furniture in the classical style for domestic use dating from the Ming and early Qing dynasties is exceptionally rare and its presence has been overlooked by both academics and connoisseurs. The rarity of these items means that

they present as a category of furniture material which has not been properly investigated and studied, both in relation to pictorial representations from the Song dynasty (such as the examples provided at Figures 2.11 and 2.12) or to similar hardwood items. Such a study would contribute to an understanding of links between hardwood and lacquer furniture and address conceptions surrounding lacquer furniture as having been produced at a later or earlier time than hardwood furniture.

APPENDIX 1: ORIGINAL LANGUAGE TEXTS

Excluded from word count

	Original text
Footnote 78	Ils sont très ingénieux, tant les hommes que les femmes, et ils sont excellent en sculpture et en maçonnerie. Ce sont également de grands peintres de feuillages, d'oiseaux, et de scènes de chasse, comme on peut le voir sur les lits et tables qui proviennent de leur pays. J'en ai vu une qui a été portée à la ville de Lisbonne en 1582. Le Capitaine Rivera, grand alguazil de Manille, a présenté cette table pour montrer sa valeur et son prix. Je me contenterai de dire qu'elle a suscité l'admiration du roi d'Espagne, qui, pourtant, n'a pas l'habitude de s'émerveiller facilement. ⁶⁴¹
Footnote 110	C'est seulement dans ces dix dernières années que les collectionneurs parisiens ont su reconnaître l'intérêt du mobilier utilitaire chinois et en réunir peu à peu les plus remarquables spécimens. On en trouvera ici, pour la première fois, un recueil d'ensemble. ⁶⁴²
Footnote 400	伴随着西方“分科治学”的学术体系的引进，中国开始了造园史的学术研究工作”营造学社与中国造园史研究
Footnote 148	花梨木出南蕃、广东，紫红色，与降真香相似，亦有香。其花有鬼面者可爱，花粗而色淡者低。广人多以作茶酒盏。 ⁶⁴³
Footnote 381	五十年前我曾為古代家具的慘遭毀壞而落淚，近年又為被盜運一空，國內將絕跡而悲傷。拙作的問世，竟導致這樣的後果，實非初料所及，只能使我徒喚奈何。 ⁶⁴⁴
Footnote 411	以後我在隆福寺舊書店買到一本楊耀先生的《中國明代室內裝飾和家其》，是一九四二年《北京大學論文集》的抽印本，篇幅很薄，但是對於念念不忘那具扶手椅的我，已經增加了一點對明式家具的

⁶⁴¹ Juan González de Mendoza, *Histoire du Grand Royaume de la Chine* [History of the Great Kingdom of China], translated from Spanish into French by Luc de la Porte. Paris: Jeremie Perier, 1588.

⁶⁴² Odilon Roche, *Les Meubles de la Chine*, Introduction, unpaginated.

⁶⁴³ Alan and Camille Fung, "Huanghuali," *Journal of the Classical Furniture Society* 1, no. 4 (Autumn 1991): 41-45. Original Chinese text in Appendix 1.

⁶⁴⁴ Wang, Shixiang. 1997. *Mingshi Jiaju Cuizhen* 明式家具萃珍 (Masterpieces from the Museum of Classical Chinese furniture). Tenth Union International Inc. vii-viii. Original text in Appendix 1.

	感性認識。不久，舊書店又送來一帙德國人艾克（G. Ecke）著的《中國花梨家具圖考》，圖版十分豐富，我不假思索地買下來 ⁶⁴⁵
Footnote 414	我國把明式家具作為一份寶貴文物遺產進行系統研究是在本世紀三十年代初開始的，是我國第一位把全部精力投身於此的學者是楊耀先生。 ⁶⁴⁶
Footnote 420	裝飾和家具在我國古時很少專書論述。可以見得到的，只有些片斷的文字和圖畫。幸而在明以上的繪畫及傳世木刻圖中，給我們留下些能以追蹤原來式樣的機會。再參照遺物，勉強能夠找到些許線索。 ⁶⁴⁷
Footnote 421	家具遺物在年代上發現最早的當推周代的銅幾（禁） ⁶⁴⁸
Footnote 438	設計者尤其不可忽略下列的五個條件；一，功用；二，美感；三、堅固；四、經濟；五、衛生。合於上述條件的，才可以算現代化。 ⁶⁴⁹
Footnote 439.	明代裝飾和家具，在式樣上是簡雅的，在做法上是合理的，我們如若想在建築上，發展東方固有藝術，千萬不可忘掉明代裝飾和家具的優點。近來一般人崇尚西式家具，幾乎將我國原有的家具式樣和做法，有一律推翻的趨勢，這真是一件可惜的事情，我敢大膽的說一句：“現代化的東西，不一定是舶來品。 ⁶⁵⁰
Footnote 441	隔斷和欄干在明代畫中，也很常見，式樣簡雅脫俗（圖 11）。隨牆書櫃（圖12）見於明木刻圖中，式樣似櫃之嵌入牆內者，板門用四抹做法，上下用軸。既經濟又美現、牆窗之外置尺欄，與《園冶》所示吻合。 ⁶⁵¹
Footnote 445	略云 一一草堂成。三間兩柱，二室四牖，廣袤豐殺，一稱心力，洞北戶，來陰風，防徂暑也；敞南薨，納陽日，虞祁寒也。木斲而已

⁶⁴⁵ Wang Shixiang, 明式家具珍賞 *Ming shi jiaju zhen shang*, 12. The characters 油印本 denotes “Mimeograph edition” A mimeograph machine duplicated small numbers of copies of printed material at low cost.

⁶⁴⁶ Yang, *Ming shi jiaju yanjiu*, 5. Original text in Appendix 1.

⁶⁴⁷ Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 14. Original text in Appendix 1.

⁶⁴⁸ Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 18. Original text in Appendix 1.

⁶⁴⁹ Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 24. Original text in Appendix 1.

⁶⁵⁰ Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 24. Original text in Appendix 1.

⁶⁵¹ Title translation for the *Yuan Ye* is from Alison Hardie's 1988 translation of Ji Cheng's work, *Ji Cheng*, Alison Hardie. 1988. *The Craft of Gardens*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.

	，不加丹；牆圯而已，不加白。碱階用石，冪窗用紙，竹簾紵幃，率稱是焉。堂中設木榻四，素屏二 …… ⁶⁵²
Footnote 446	由上面一段記錄裡，可以看出榻在當時的客廳裡，是怎樣的需要。在功用上想是不次於現今的沙發椅了。 ⁶⁵³
Footnote 447	明代家具的用材約可分為大理石，螺鈿、雕漆、推光漆，紫檀，黃花梨，紅木，杞梓木，楠木，樟木，南榆，黃楊等等 ⁶⁵⁴
Footnote 453	十年浩劫中，楊耀先生受到不應有的衝擊與迫害，身心受到嚴重摧殘，於1978年8月21日在京不幸逝世。 ⁶⁵⁵
Footnote 454	解放后的十多年里,我国家具事业有了很大的发展,取得了很大成绩。为了满足广大劳动人民的需要,国家新建了一批家具厂,培养了大批技术工人和 家具设计的力量。 ⁶⁵⁶
Footnote 462	梦家则十分严肃认真,交椅前拦上红头绳,不许碰,更不许坐,我曾笑他 '比博物馆还要博物馆' ⁶⁵⁷
Footnote 477	修复古典红木家具非常出名的老手艺人…手艺高超，修复家具的态度一丝不苟。 ⁶⁵⁸
Footnote 484	注意新家具，就不能不重視古代家具，因為這是我們祖先的智慧結晶，是我們的文化遺產。 ⁶⁵⁹
Footnote 492	我们去博物馆或工艺美术展览参观漆器，品种纷呈，文饰夺目，往往使人赞叹不已。倘进而再读一读《髹饰录》，会发现一般博物馆及展览会所陈列的，还只不过是传统品种的一小部分。这就更加认识到我

⁶⁵² Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 22. Original text in Appendix 1.

⁶⁵³ Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 20. Original text in Appendix 1.

⁶⁵⁴ Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 19. Original text in Appendix 1.

⁶⁵⁵ Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 24. Original Chinese text at Appendix 1.

⁶⁵⁶ Yang, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*, 25. Original text in Appendix 1.

⁶⁵⁷ Zheng, *Shoucang Shisan Jia*, 301. Original text in Appendix 1.

⁶⁵⁸ Fang, *Chen Mengjia he ta de pengyoumen*, 46. Zu Lianpeng is described as “A well-known old craftsman who restores hongmu furniture... with superb craftsmanship and a meticulous approach to restoring furniture”. Zu’s importance to Wang’s scholarship and collecting activities is such that he was referenced as a collaborator throughout Wang’s writing on furniture.

⁶⁵⁹ Wang Shixiang, 1957, 呼籲搶救古代家具 An Appeal to Save Classical Chinese Furniture”, quotation from the original publication in *Wenwu Cankao Ziliao*, No. 6, 1957, 64-65. A comparison between the original 1957 article and the English translation printed in 1991 indicates that the later translation is faithful to the original publication.

	<p>国传统漆器丰富多彩到何等程度!前代工匠的勤 劳智慧,创造了精神和物质财富,美化了生活,为人类作出了贡献,使我们振奋自豪, 不由地受到了爱国主义的教育。⁶⁶⁰</p>
Footnote 617	<p>最後我要表達對這批家具歸屬的關切之情。據聞易主之後,有不少件將為旅美和居台的中華人 士所有。我衷心祝願這些祖先遺留下來的藝術珍品,在炎黃子孫手中保留得越多越好!越多越好!⁶⁶¹</p>

⁶⁶⁰ Wang Shixiang. 1998. *Xiushilu jieshuo: Zhongguo chuangtong qi gongyi yanjiu* 髹饰录解说: 中国传统漆工艺研究 (Commentary on the Record of Lacquer Decoration: Research on Traditional Chinese Lacquer Crafts). Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe. 7-9. Original text in Appendix 1.

⁶⁶¹ Wang, *Mingshi Jiaju Cuizhen*, viii.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Illustrations

Figure 1 Photograph of Gustav Ecke and Tseng Yu-ho. Source: “Gustav Emil Wilhelm Ecke, 1896-1971,” National Museum of Asian Art. <https://asia-archive.si.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Ecke-Gustav.pdf>. Accessed 1 March 2024.



Figure 2 Couch. *Huanghuali*. Source: Gustav Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 1944. Item no. 17, plate 21.

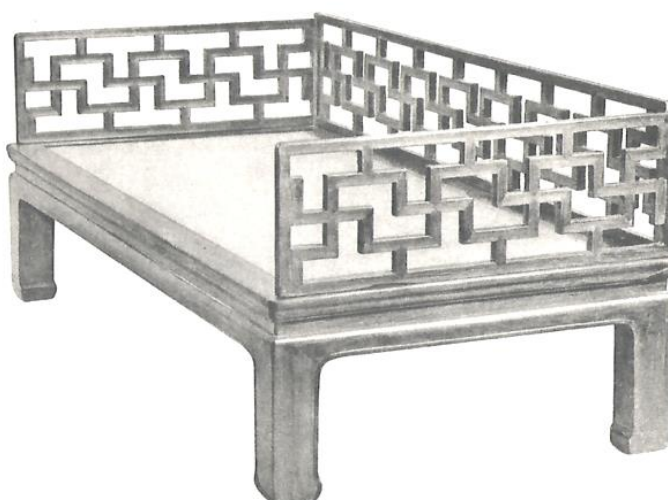


Figure 3

Folding armchair. Carved red lacquer on wood, woven mat seat. Mid-sixteenth century. Source: Victoria and Albert Museum.
<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O73594/chair-unknown/> Accessed 13 August 2024.



Figure 4

Small recessed-leg table. Lacquer on softwood wood. Inscription dated 1662 (Early Qing dynasty). Source: Photograph courtesy of C.L.Ma.



Figure 5 *Dalbergia odorifera* T. Chen. Tangential surface. Photo by author. Tangential surface (30x). Huanghuali rounded-corner cabinet, Haven Collection.

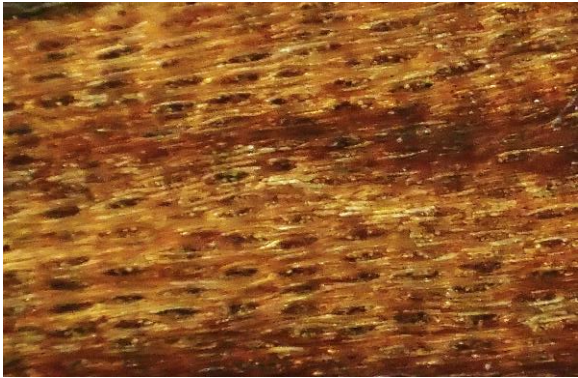


Figure 6a *Dalbergia odorifera* T. Chen. Growth rings surrounding knots. Photo by author. Huanghuali waisted square table, Haven Collection.



Figure 6b Early Ming dynasty description of *huanghuali*. Print, ink on paper. Source: Cao Zhao 曹昭. *Xinzeng Ge gu yao lun* 新增格古要论 (The Newly Expanded Essential Treatise on Antiquities). Wang Zuo 王佐 *et al.* eds. 1459. Chapter 8, 6.

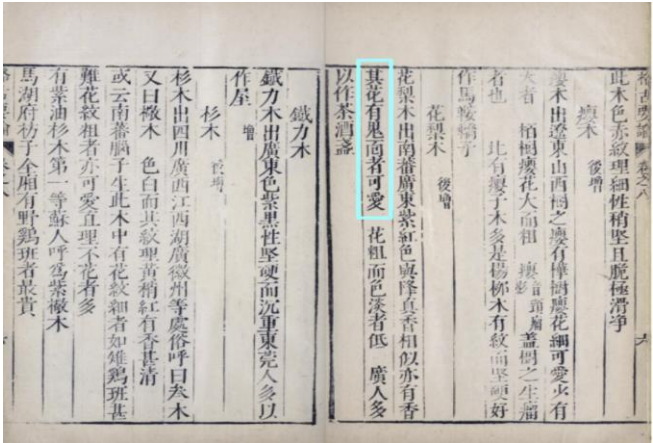


Figure 7 Throne. Carved *zitan* wood with jade inlay, silk. Dated Eighteenth century. Qing dynasty. Palace Museum, Beijing.
<https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/gear/230928.html>. Accessed 29 August 2024.



Figure 8 A seventeenth century wooden bench bearing the crest of Leonardo de Medici. Source: Walter A. Dyer “Furniture of The Italian Renaissance ”
 Arts & Decoration (1910-1918) 7, no. 3 (1917): 131-34.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43799760> Accessed 7 January 2024



Figure 9

Armchair. Black lacquered softwood. Sixteenth or seventeenth century.
 Source: Palace Museum, Beijing.
<https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/gear/229576>. Accessed 7 December 2023.



Chapter 1 Illustrations

Figure 1.1

Qiu Ying (c.1494-1552). *Spring Dawn in the Han Palace*. *Spring Dawn in the Han Palace*. By Qiu Ying (c. 1494–1552). Ming dynasty. Handscroll, ink and colour on silk, 30.6 x 574.1cm. Source: National Palace Museum, Taipei.
<https://theme.npm.edu.tw/selection/Article.aspx?sNo=04000980&lang=2>
 Accessed 2 December 2023.



Figure 1.2 Table. Rosewood table with mother of pearl inlay. Early 20th century, Qing dynasty. Source: Guangdong Museum, China. https://www.gdmuseum.com/cn/col73/list_2546. Accessed 28 September 2023.



Figure 1.3 Throne. Hardwood. Qing dynasty. Source: Herbert Cescinsky, *Chinese Furniture*, 1922. Plate 40.

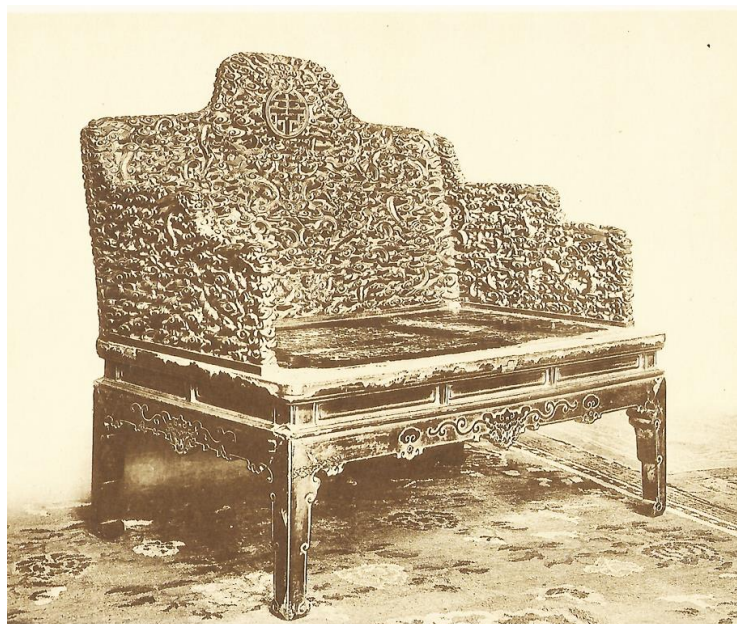


Figure 1.4 Incense stands. Lacquered wood. Qing dynasty. Source: Herbert Cescinsky, *Chinese Furniture*, 1922. Plate 48.



Figure 1.5 Table. Black lacquered wood. Qing dynasty. Source: Herbert Cescinsky, *Chinese Furniture*, 1922. Plate 33.



Figure 1.6 Catalogue, *Blackwoodware*. Source: *Catalogue of Chinese Furniture: Blackwoodware*, Man Chuen Oi Ting, c. 1900.



Figure 1.7 Table with four detachable legs. Pottery. Han dynasty. Source: John Ferguson, *Survey of Chinese Art*, 1931. 176.

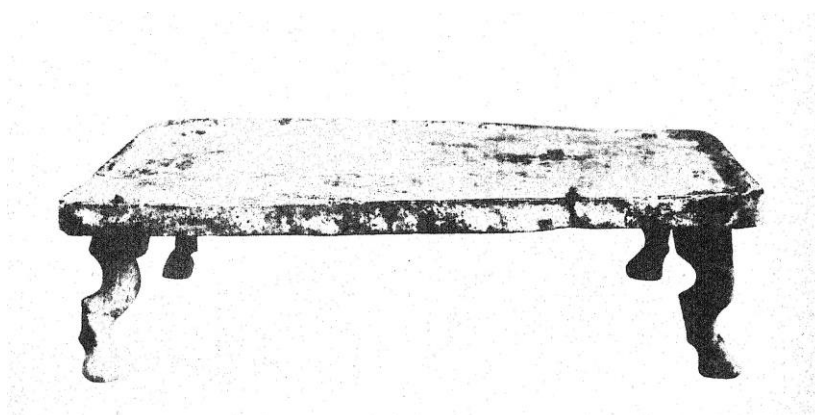


Figure 1.8 Corner-legged table. Wood unspecified. Ming dynasty. Source: John Ferguson, *Survey of Chinese Art*, 1931. 177.

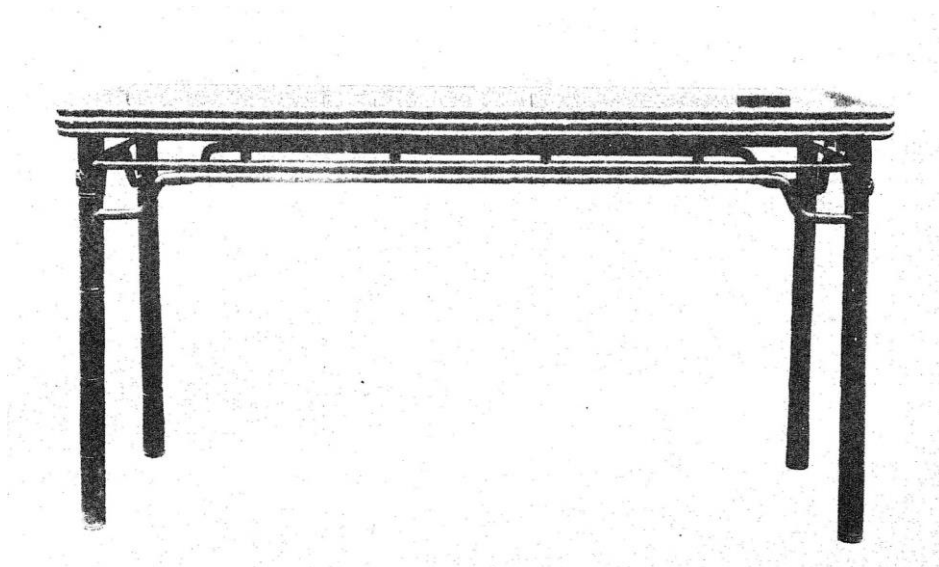


Figure 1.9 Throne chair. Wood unspecified. Tai Chi Tien, Palace Museum. Source: John Ferguson, *Survey of Chinese Art*, 1931. 178.

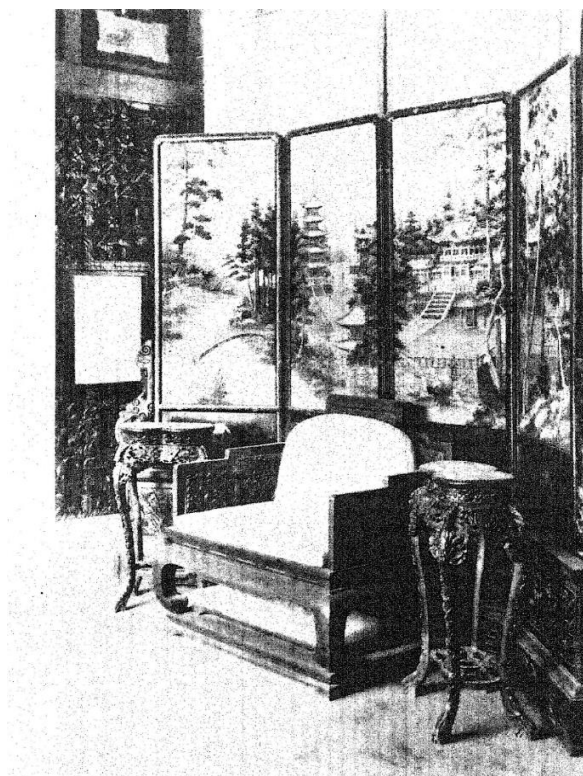


Figure 1.10 Interior of the reception room of Guo Baochang. Source: John Ferguson, *Survey of Chinese Art*, 1931. 180.

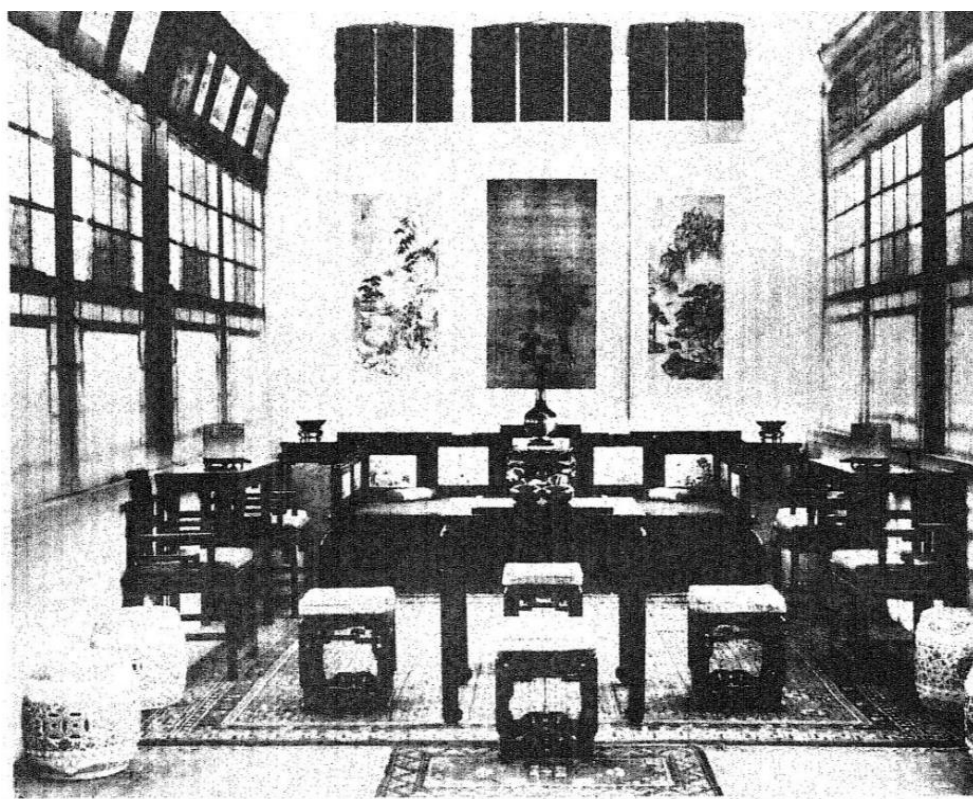


Figure 1.11a Ritual Altar Table. Bronze. Western Zhou dynasty (1046–771 BCE). Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gallery 207. Object No. 24.72.1. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/42164>. Accessed 5 July 2023.



Figure 1.13 Canopy bed with alcove. *Huanghuali* and painted soft wood base and canopy, silk gauze curtains. Sixteenth century. Source: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Object Number 64-4/4. Gallery G202. <https://art.nelson-atkins.org/objects/17442/canopy-bed-with-alcove>



Figure 1.14 Cabinet. *Huanghuali*. Source: Gustav Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*. 1944. Item no. 90, plate 111.



Figure 1.15 Set of *huanghuali* folding chairs. Sixteenth or seventeenth century. Source: Bonhams. *Fine Chinese Art* sale. Lot 80. London: 9 November 2017. <https://www.bonhams.com/auction/24101/lot/80/an-important-and-exceptionally-rare-set-of-four-huanghuali-folding-chairs-jiaoyi-16th17th-century-4/>.



Figure 1.16 Armchair. *Hongmu* with board seat. Source: Gustav Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 1944. Item 88, Plate 110.



Chapter 2 Illustrations

Figure 2.1 Woodcut illustrations from the Spencer Collection displayed at the exhibition Chinese Household Furniture from the Collection of George Kates. Source: Brooklyn Museum. <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/exhibitions/847>. Accessed 5 December 2023.



Figure 2.2 Japanese table of early Ming design. Line drawing. Source: Gustav Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 1944. Fig.7(LIX) 4.

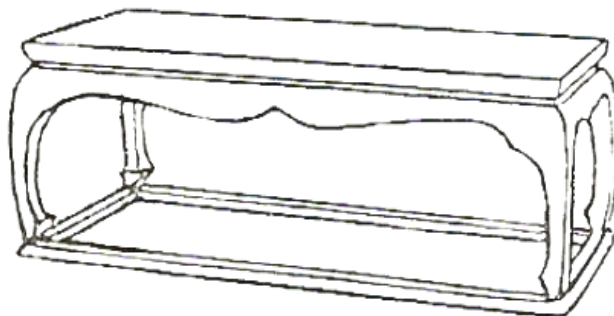


Figure 2.3 Red lacquer softwood table, metal legs. Eastern Han dynasty (25-220 CE). Source: Harvard Art Museums. <https://harvardartmuseums.org/collections/object/77785?position=77785>. Accessed 5 April 2023.



Figure 2.4 Wooden table excavated from Han tomb in Korea. Line drawing. Source: Wilma Fairbank, "A Structural Key to Han Mural Art." 1942. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2717814>. Accessed 5 October

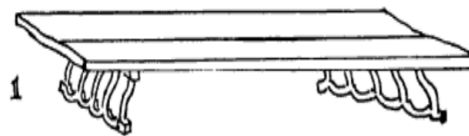


Figure 2.5 Table. Black lacquer on softwood. Ming dynasty. Source: Sotheby's. *Curiosity IV*, 1 April 2018. Sale number: HK0793, lot 3042. <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2018/curiosity-iv-hk0793/lot.3042.html?locale=en>. Accessed 3 January 2023.



Figure 2.6 Recessed-leg table. Carved red lacquer on wood. Late 13th century.
Source: Zhang County Museum, China.



Figure 2.7 Incense table. Red lacquered with marble inlay. Reputedly Song dynasty (10th century). 50 x 35 x height 41 cm. Source: Lee Yu-kuan, *Oriental Lacquer Arts*, 1972. 307.



Figure 2.8 Kang table. Lacquered wood inlaid with mother of pearl. 10th century.
Source: Lee Yu-kuan, *Oriental Lacquer Arts*, 1972. 303.



Figure 2.9 Section of handscroll, *The Thirteen Emperors*, in the style of Yan Liben. (c.600-673). Handscroll, ink and colours on silk, 51.3 x 531 cm. Source: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
<https://collections.mfa.org/objects/29071> Accessed 18 July 2023.



Figure 2.10 Section of handscroll, *Night Revels of Han Xizai*, in the style of Gu Hongzhong. (c.910–980). Handscroll, ink and colours on silk, 28.7 x 335.5 c.m. Palace Museum collection, Beijing.
<https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/paint/228200.html>. Accessed 20 July 2023.



Figure 2.11 *Literary Gathering*, Huizong's Painting Academy. Song dynasty (960–1276 CE). Inscribed by Emperor Huizong (r. 1101–1125). Hanging scroll, ink and colours on silk. National Palace Museum, Taipei.
<https://theme.npm.edu.tw/selection/Article.aspx?sNo=04009144&lang=2>
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Figure 2.12 *Five Scholars of the Tang Dynasty*, Liu Songnian, (active 1174–1224). Hanging scroll, ink and colours on silk, 174.7x106.6 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.
<https://digitalarchive.npm.gov.tw/Painting/Content?pid=1217&Dept=P>
 Accessed 20 July 2023.



Figure 2.13 Pair of seated figures playing *liubo*. Pottery. 1st century BCE-1st century CE. Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/44732>. Accessed 18 January 2024.



Figure 2.14 *Liubo* chess set. Red and black lacquer on wood. Early Western Han Dynasty (206-168 BCE) *bo* chess set. Early Western Han dynasty. Source: No.3 (Li Xi's Tomb), Hunan Provincial Museum. <https://www.hnmuseum.com/en/gallery/node/1048/1>. Accessed 18 January 2024.



Figure 2.15 “Go” chess board. Stone. Eastern Han Dynasty Eastern Han dynasty (25-220 CE). Source: *Murals of Wangdu Han Tomb*, Chinese Classical Art Publishing House, 1955.

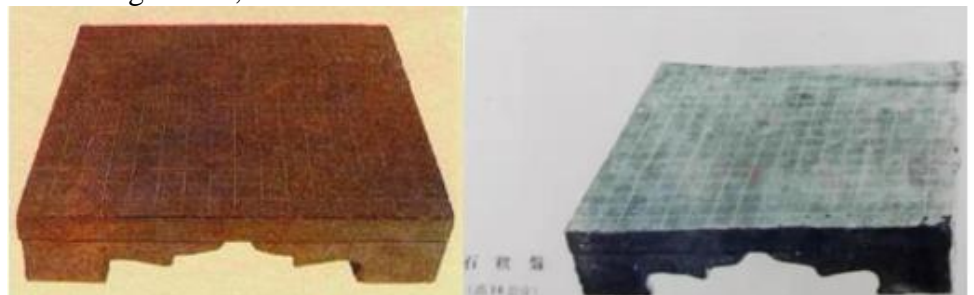


Figure 2.16 Burial model of *liubo*-players. Earthenware. Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220 CE). Source: Royal Ontario Museum.
<https://collections.rom.on.ca/objects/518650/bural-model-of-liuboplayers-game-board-and-table?ctx=52d36605-5e71-4b22-be06-962f9b054f62&idx=62>. Accessed 18 January 2024.



Figure 2.17 Burial “Go” board. White glazed porcelain. Sui dynasty (581-618 CE) Henan Museum.
https://www.chnmus.net/sitesources/hnsbwy/page_pc/dzjp/mzyp/bycwqp/ist1.html. Accessed 15 September 2024.

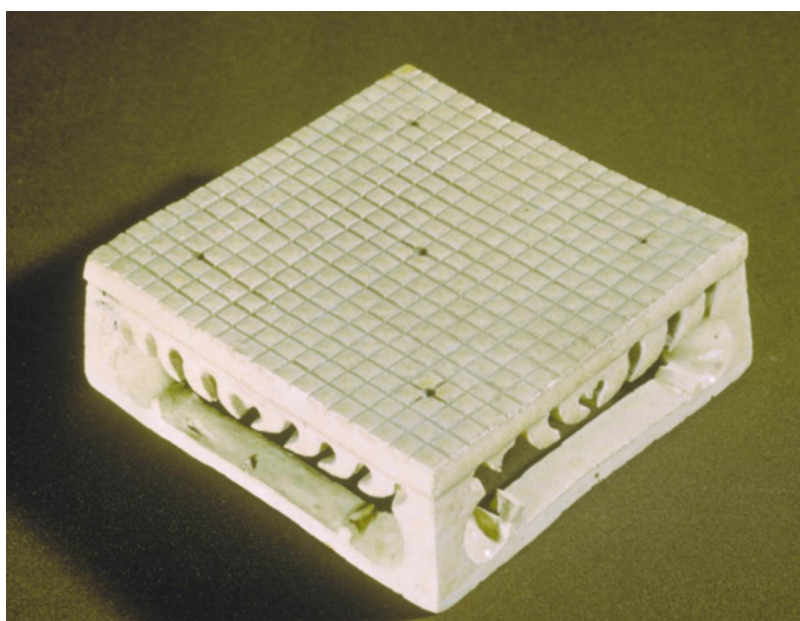


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Figure 2.19 Bed with lattice railings. Metal. Warring States period (c. 475-221 BCE). Source: "Xinyang Chu Tomb", Beijing : Cultural Relics Publishing House, 1986.

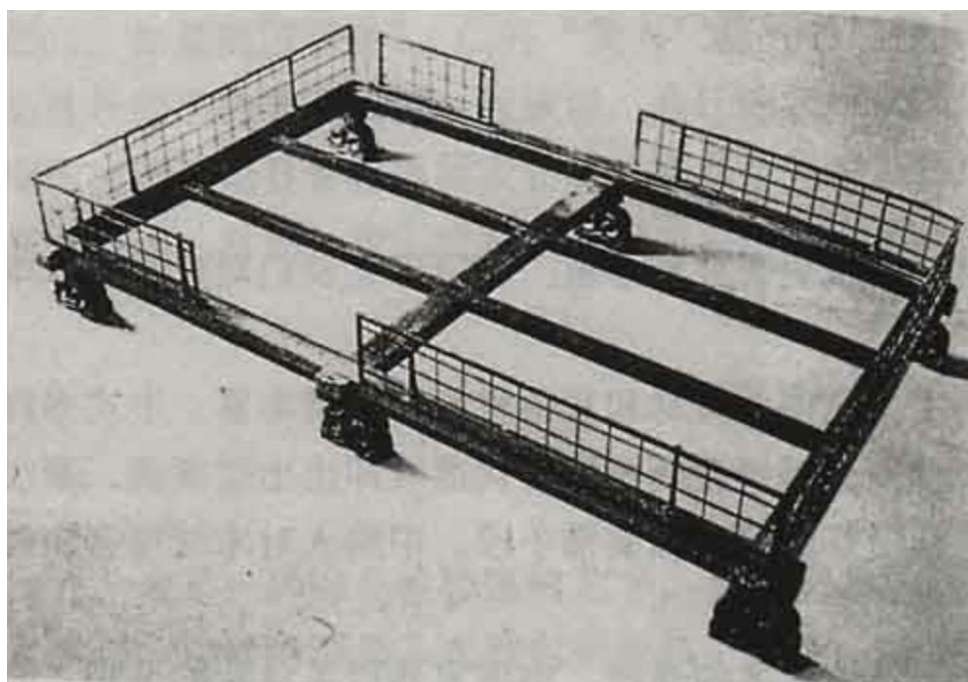


Figure 2.20 Coffin Platform, North Wei Dynasty. (386-534), Source: “Pictorial Stones from Chinese Tombs”, *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, 1984. 71, no. 9 (1984): 302-3, Figure.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25159885?seq=5>. Accessed 18 January 2024.

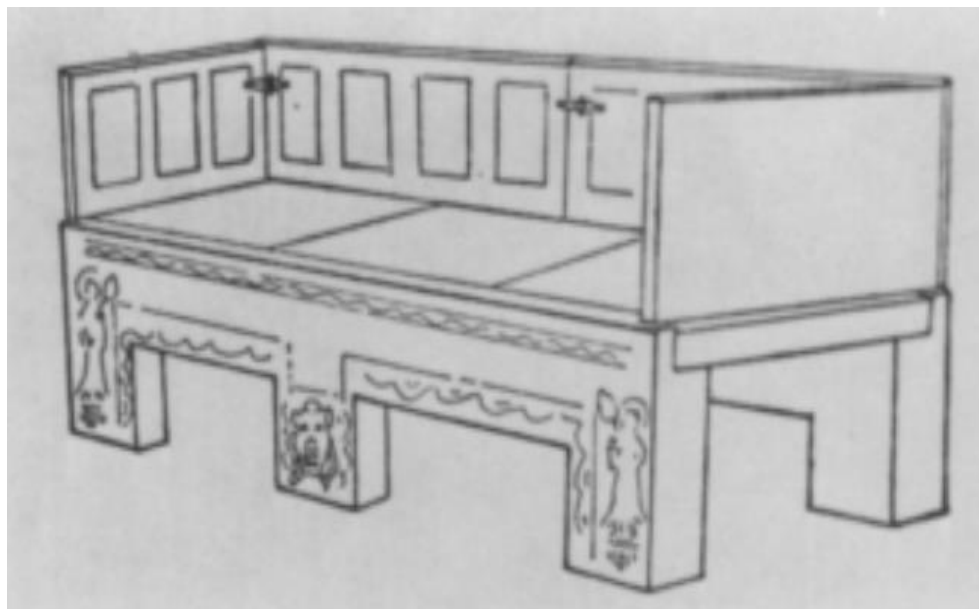


Figure 2.21 Foldable bed. Metal. Warring States period (c. 475-221 BCE) Replica. Source: Zhu tomb at Baoshan, Jingmen, Hubei Province, 1986, Jingmen City Museum.

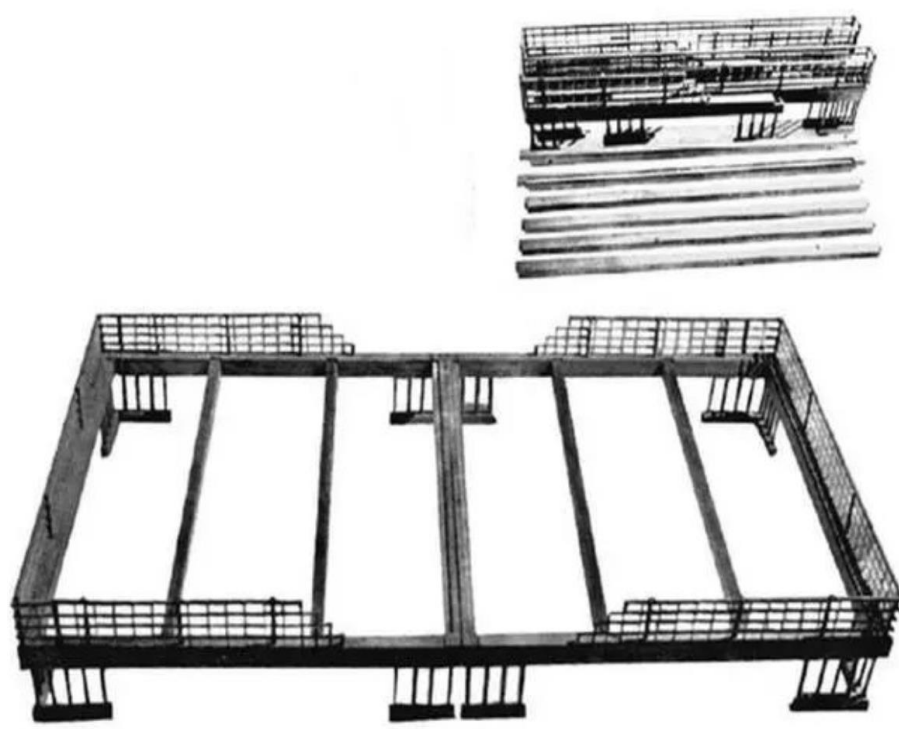


Figure 2.22 Paul Frenzeny. *Scene in a Chinese Opium Palace*. Wood engraving. 1880. Source: The Museum of the City of San Francisco. <https://sfmuseum.org/hist6/frenzeny.html>. Accessed 16 January 2024.



Figure 2.23 One of four inscribed armchairs. *Zitan*. Seventeenth century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/54284> Accessed 13 December 2023.



Figure 2.24 Carved wooden pillar, Yuan dynasty (1279-1368). Source: Robert Hatfield Ellsworth, *Chinese Furniture: Hardwood Examples*, 1971. 17.



Figure 2.25 Chair cover. Textile. Eighteenth century. Source: Robert Hatfield Ellsworth, *Chinese Furniture: Hardwood Examples*, 1971. 84.



Figure 2.26 Carpenter's home in Zhejiang province, 1994. Source: Nancy Berliner and Sarah Handler, *Friends of the House*, 1995, 14.



Figure 2.27 Armchair, Shaanxi province. South elm. Qing dynasty. Source: Nancy Berliner and Sarah Handler, *Friends of the House*, Peabody Essex Museum Collections, 1995, 68.



Figure 2.28 Armchair. *Huanghuali*. Seventeenth to eighteenth century. Source: Christie's New York. Sale: 2830, 20-21 March 2014, lot 2311, price realised USD 485,000. Accessed 20 January 2024. <https://www.christies.com/lot/a-rare-pair-of-huanghuali-low-back-armchairs-5776909/?intObjectID=5776909&lid=1>



Figure 2.29 *Kang* table. Lacquer. Ming Dynasty, Sixteenth century. Source: Sotheby's Hong Kong. Sale Number: HK0214, 2005. Accessed 20 January 2024. <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2005/fine-chinese-ceramics-works-of-art-hk0214/lot.633.html>



Chapter 3 Illustrations

Figure 3.1 Drawing by Yang Yao, dated 1935. Source: Gustav Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, 1944. Item no. 100, plate 123.

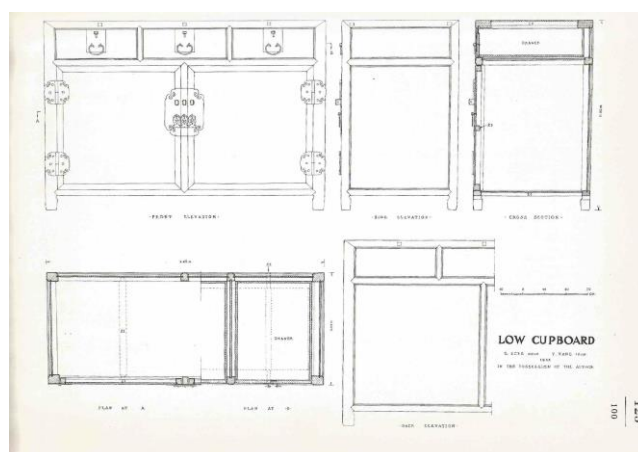


Figure 3.2 Drawing by Yang Yao, dated 1935. Source: Gustav Ecke, *Chinese Domestic Furniture*. Item no. 78, plate 99.

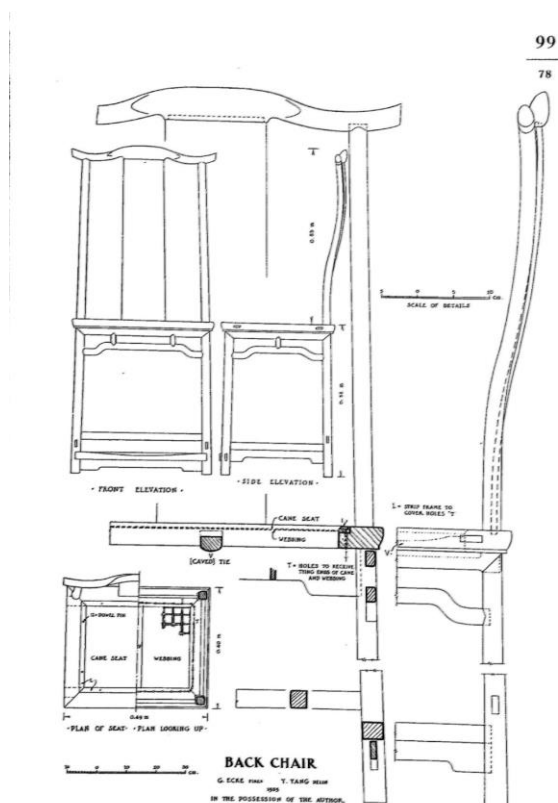


Figure 3.3 Peking Union Medical College Hospital, Beijing. © Peking Union Medical College Hospital. <https://www.pumch.cn/en/detail/22020.html>. Accessed 17 January 2024.

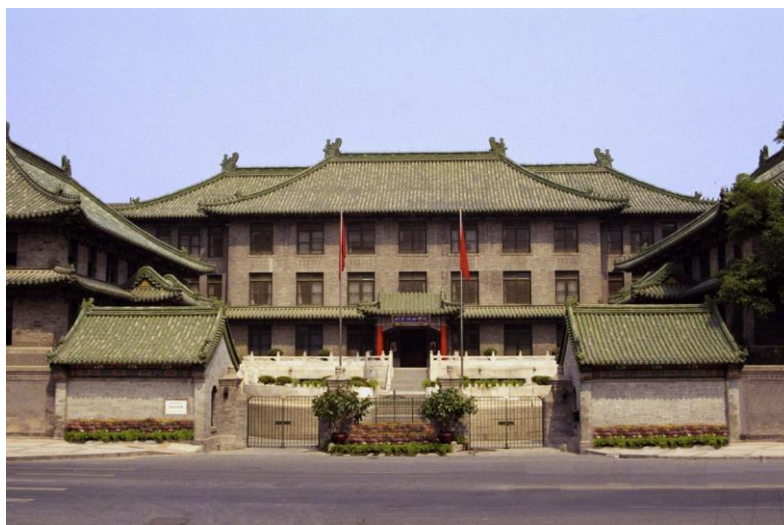


Figure 3.4 Line drawing, wall-mounted bookcase. Yang Yao. *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*. China Construction Industry Press, 1986. Figure 12, 18.

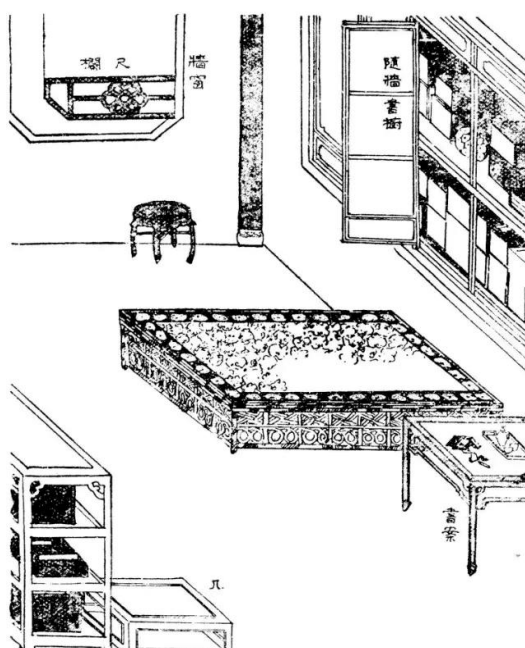


Figure 3.5 Architectural illustration. Yang Yao. *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*., China Construction Industry Press, 1986. Figure 8, 14.

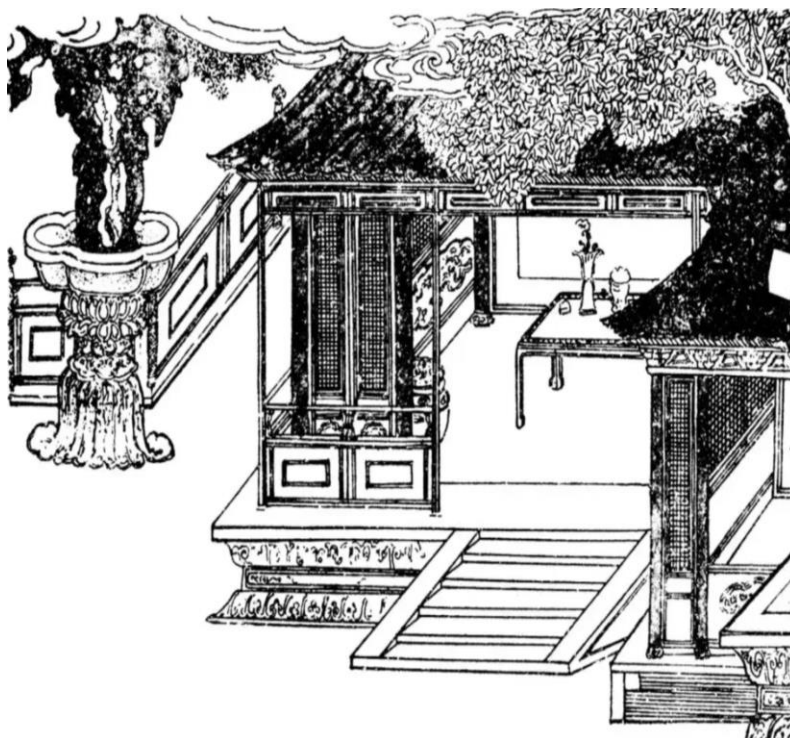


Figure 3.6 Illustration of Dunhuang cave 285. Source: Yang Yao. *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu*. China Construction Industry Press, 1986, 5. The Mogao Grottoes Cave 285 Western Wei Dynasty (535-556 CE). Dunhuang Academy. <https://www.e-dunhuang.com/cave/10.0001/0001.0001.0285>.



Figure 3.7 Categories of “recessed-leg tables”. Source: Wang Shixiang, *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture*, 1990. 63.

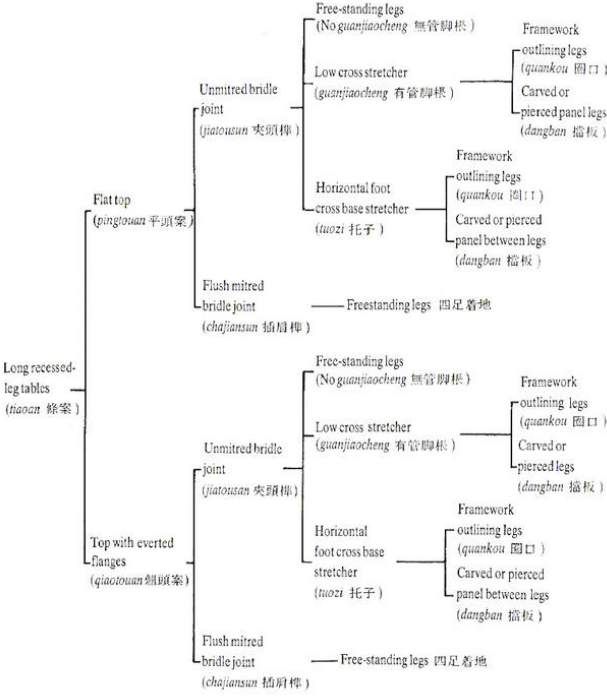


Figure 3.8 Large throne. Lacquered and gilded wood. Ming or Qing dynasty, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Arts, Kansas City. Source: Tian Jiaqing, *Classic Chinese Furniture of the Ming and Qing Dynasty*, 1996. 130-131.



Figure 4.1 “Bedroom S.” Photograph of Caroline Bieber’s bedroom in Beijing, 1934. Source: Photo album, “Anna Maria and Biba,” 1934, page 5. Laurence Sickman Papers, MSS 001, Box 9, Folder 13. Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Archives.



Figure 4.2 Chair. *Huanghuali*. Source: George Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*. 1948. Item 79, 104-105



Figure 4.3 “Sitting room” Photograph of Caroline Bieber’s sitting room in Beijing, 1934. Source: Photo album, “Anna Maria and Biba” 1934. MSS001_B09F13_CFBieberAlbum. Page 4. Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Archives.



Figure 4.4 Low chest. *Yumu*, Source: George Kates, *Chinese Household Furniture*. 1948. Figure 99, 115.



Figure 4.5

Lawrence and May Sickman in Beijing. Source: Laurence Sickman Papers, MSS 001, Box 16, Sleeve 01. Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Archives.



Figure 4.6

Pair of *huanghuali* round backed chairs. Ming dynasty. Source: Parke-Bernet. 1955. *Important Chinese Furniture of the XVII-XVIII Century, Boxes Lamps and Other Decorative Objects, Chinese Jades & Other Semi-Precious Mineral Carvings...*, The Property of Dr George N. Kates... : [Sale at New York, January 27th 1955, Parke-Bernet Galleries]. New York: Parke-Bernet. 84.

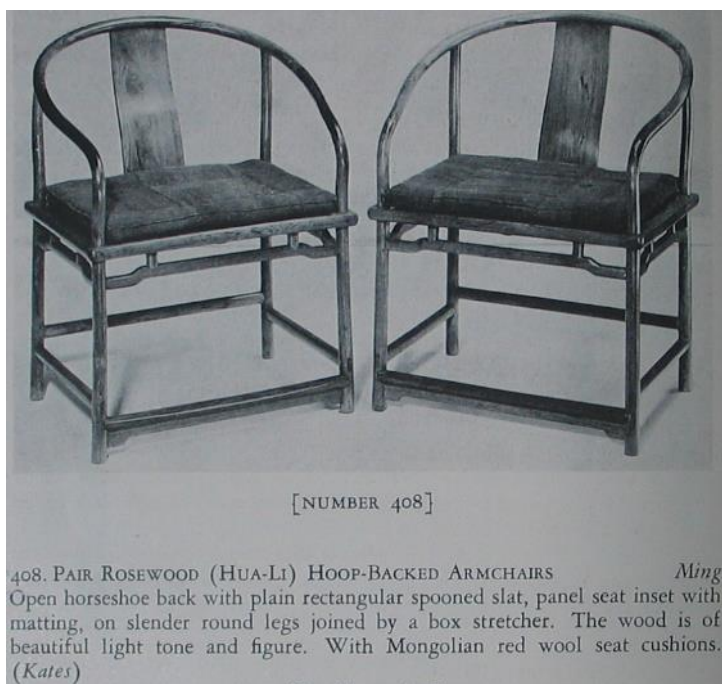


Figure 4.7 Table. Huali wood. Qing dynasty. Source: Parke-Bernet. 1955. *Important Chinese Furniture of the XVII-XVIII Century, Boxes Lamps and Other Decorative Objects, Chinese Jades & Other Semi-Precious Mineral Carvings...*, The Property of Dr George N. Kates.[Sale at New York, January 27, 1955, Parke-Bernet Galleries]. New York: Parke-Bernet. 79.

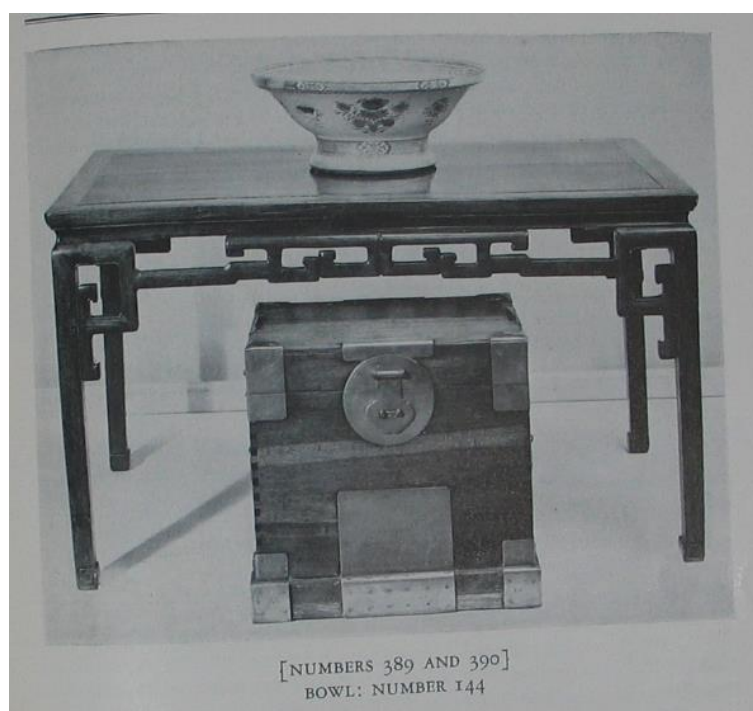


Figure 4.8 Round backed chairs, Kullgren exhibition at LACMA Source: Gregor Norman-Wilcox, "Early Chinese Furniture (II)." JCCFS, Autumn 1991 1:4, 54.



Figure 4.9 Kullgren exhibition display, LACMA. *Jichimu* cabinets with open mitred fretwork panels. Source: Kullgren Collection Archive. Copyright Nicholas Grindley.



Figure 4.10 Exhibition display, Kullgren Furniture Exhibition, LACMA (1942-1946). Photograph, Kullgren Collection Archive. Copyright Nicholas Grindley



Figure 4.11 Furniture Exhibition, Baltimore Museum of Art, 1946. Source: Jeanne Chapman. "The Baltimore Museum's 1946 Exhibition of Chinese Furniture". *JCCFS*. 3:3. Summer 1993.67-70. 69



Figure 4.12 *Jichimu kang* table, Laurence Sickman collection. Source: Laurence Sickman Papers, MSS 001, Box 33a, Folder 21. Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Archives.



Figure 4.13 Pair of *huanghuali* round backed armchair in bamboo style. Purchased Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Source: Photo by author.

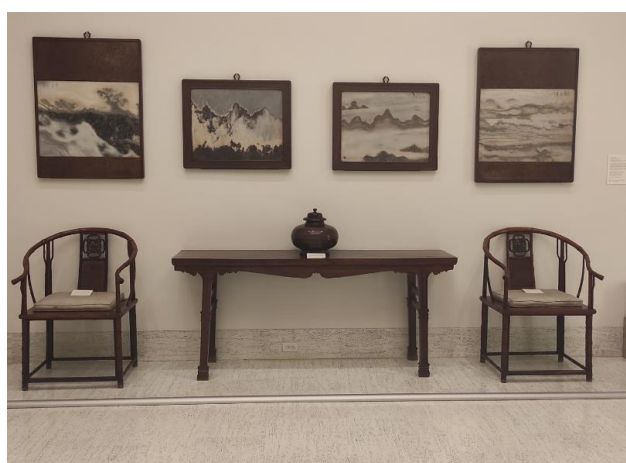


Figure 4.14 *Huanghuali* altar table with pierced sides, Speer collection. Table shown in the Chinese furniture galleries at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Source: Photo by author.



Figure 4.15 *Huanghuali* couch, Horstmann collection. Source: Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Photo by author.



Figure 4.16 Ming Room at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Source: Alfreda Murck and Wen Fong. "A Chinese Garden Court: The Astor Court at the Metropolitan Museum of Art." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 38, no. 3 (1980): 3-64. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3269268>.



Figure 4.17 Studio of Gratifying Discourse, Wood, ceramic tile stone, lacquer, *tai-hu* rock. Dated 1797. Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Source: Jacobsen, *Classical Chinese Furniture in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts*. Fig. 29, 32.



Figure 4.18 Wu Family Reception Hall at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Wood, ceramic, tile, plaster, lacquer and stone. Seventeenth century. Source: Minneapolis Institute of Arts. <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/9413/the-wu-family-reception-hall-china>. Accessed February 2025.



Figure 4.19a Screen. *Hua, nghuali tiele* and marble screen. Seventeenth century. Source: Christies. <https://www.christies.com/en/stories/the-best-collections-of-classical-chinese-furniture-e2e755b2a9cb4dcbbc44a77d23186dc8>. Accessed 10 August 2024.



Figure 4.19b Screen. *Huanghuali, tieli* and marble. Ming dynasty. Source: Jacobsen, *Classical Chinese Furniture in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts*. Fig. 24, 30.



Figure 4.20 Classical furniture display at the Shanghai Museum. Source: Quincy Chang. *The Chuang Family Bequest of Fine Ming and Qing Furniture in the Shanghai Museum*. 1988. 14.

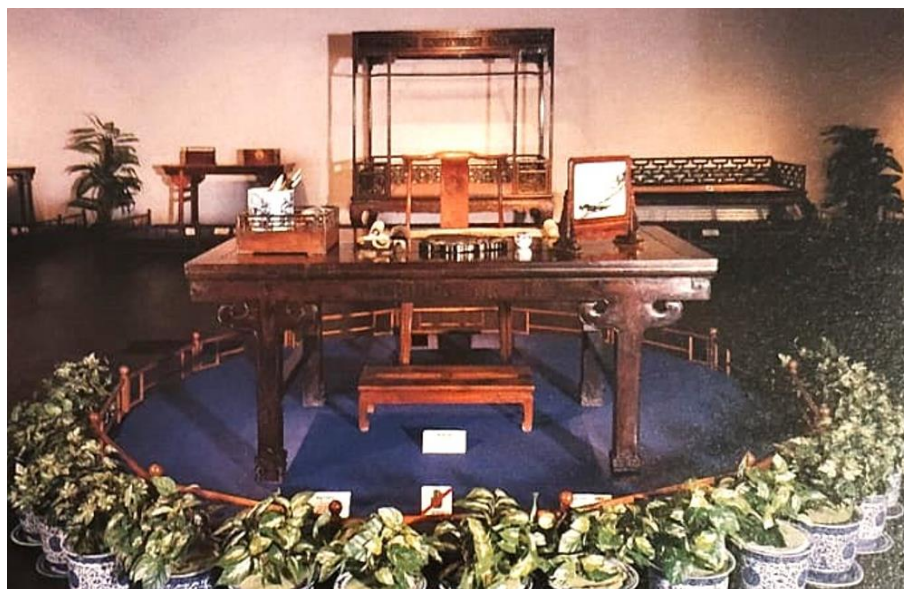


Figure 4.21 Table. *Huanghuali*. Ming dynasty. Tsinghua University Art Museum, Beijing. Source: Photo by author.



Figure 4.22 Table, *Huanghuali*. Ming dynasty. Source: Prince Gong's Palace, Beijing. Photo by author



Figure 4.23 Altar table. *Yumu* wood and lacquer.. 13/15th century. Source: C.L. Ma Classical Chinese Furniture Museum, Tianjin. Photo by author



Figure 4.24a Portable lunch box. Lacquer. Ming Dynasty C.L. Ma Collection. Source: Curtis Evarts, *C.L. Ma Traditional Chinese Furniture from the Greater Shanxi Region*. 1999. Item 107.



Figure 4.24b Tang dynasty portable lunch box, Li Shou tomb carving Source: Yang, Zhishui 扬之水. 2015. *Tang Song Jiaju Xunwei 唐宋家具寻微* (A look at the furniture of the Tang and Song Dynasties). Hong Kong Open Page Publishing Company Limited, 2015, 103.



