

COMPARATIVE STUDY OF FURNITURE STYLES FROM THE QING DYNASTY

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Abstract: *Traditional Chinese furniture is a valuable part of the world cultural heritage. The Ming and Qing dynasties are considered golden ages of Chinese furniture history. Various furniture manufacturing centres with different regional styles appeared, especially after the reign of Emperor Qianlong. The paper presents a preliminary comparative study of the six main styles of Qing furniture. These analysed data of cultural background, materials used, and modelling of different styles offer readers a better understanding of traditional Chinese furniture, aiming to bring a contribution to the relevant scientific information needed for the identification, conservation, and restoration of historic Chinese furniture.*

Key words: *traditional Chinese furniture, Qing, Su, Jing, Guang and Chuan furniture styles.*

1. Introduction

Furniture is a generic term defining objects intended to support/assist various human activities, such as seating, sleeping, eating, working, resting etc. [12], [15]. However, from ancient times to present days furniture has cumulated functionality and aesthetic/artistic values, being a relevant expression of human culture and civilization in continuous development. Chinese furniture started as stone and bronze furniture of several thousand years ago [9, 10], [23]. In the beginning, people sat on mats or low platforms and used low tables and armrests with the mat-level mode of living. Following changes in lifestyles, in circa the 10th century (Song

dynasty) it became common in China to sit on elevated seats at high tables [1]. During the 16th and 17th century, late Ming and early Qing Dynasties, due to economic development, social mobility (ocean shipping industry), a sharp rise in the interest in the aesthetics and skills of artisans, refined over many generations all intersected in one prolonged period, the design and craftsmanship of Chinese furniture merged to reach an unprecedented apex [8], [21], [25]. Various furniture manufacturing centres with different regional styles appeared, especially after the reign of Emperor Qianlong. For example, *Su* style furniture was developed in Suzhou and Yangzhou, *Jing* style originated in the centre of

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Beijing, and *Guang* style came from Guangzhou. According to “Encyclopaedia of Chinese traditional furniture”, written by Zhang Fuchang [22], based on the geographic factor, traditional Chinese furniture from the Qing dynasty can be divided in *Su*, *Jing*, *Guang*, *Chuan*, *Ning*, *Jin*, *Xian*, *Wannan*, *Henan*, *Hai*, and *Taiwan*; 11 styles, but *Su*, *Jing*, *Guang*, *Jin*, *Ning*, and *Chuan* are usually considered the six most important furniture making centres (Figure 1) [11, 20]. The exemplifications of these six styles of Qing furniture are presented in Figure 2.

The present paper aims at collecting, disposing, and analysing the characterizations (cultural background, materials used, and modelling and style features) of the six most important styles of Qing furniture. These analysed data offer readers a better understanding of Chinese

traditional furniture, aiming to bring a contribution to the relevant scientific information needed for the identification, conservation, and restoration of historic Chinese furniture.

2. Qing Furniture Styles

2.1. *Su*-Styled Furniture

2.1.1. Cultural Background

The furniture made in Suzhou (*Su* for short) and in the surrounding area enjoys the highest artistic value. Suzhou was an economics, handicrafts, and overseas trade centre in ancient China, having a long history. In the Sui and Tang dynasty (581AD—907AD), due to the improvements in agricultural techniques, Suzhou became an important grain-producing area in China [13].



Fig. 1. Six important Qing furniture making centres



a



b



c



d



e



f

Fig. 2. The exemplifications of the six styles of Qing furniture: a. Su-style chair [13]; b. Jing-style throne [23]; c. Guang-style chair [2]; d. Jin-style chair [24]; e. Ning style chair [22]; f. Chuan-style chair [11]

Up to the North Song Dynasty (960–1127), in China, 90% of the grains were produced in Suzhou because of the good weather for the crops in the *Taihu* lake basin. In the South Dynasty (1127–1279), after the political centre moved to *Lin'an* (today Hangzhou), Suzhou became a silk distribution centre. After the Song and Yuan dynasties, Suzhou became the centre of handicraft production such as jade sculpture, copper mining, woven seats, ceramics, embroidery, cane weaving, lacquer ware etc. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Suzhou, which was known as "paradise", became the centre of economic development in the regions south of the Yangtze River. In terms of culture, Suzhou has a strong cultural heritage. The four great masters of the Wumen School of the Ming dynasty, Shenzhou, Wenzhengming, Tangyin, and Chouying, lived in Suzhou for a long time [13, 17]. The formation and development of Suzhou furniture was closely related to the highly developed economy and culture at that time.

2.1.2. Materials Used

Using local materials is the most basic law for humans to adapt to the environment and create material products that meet their daily needs. Ju wood (*Zelkova serrata*), also called south elm or Chinese beech, is the common local wood specie used for Su-styled furniture. It mainly grows in the Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Anhui provinces. Chinese beech wood comes from reddish old trees and has a clear and beautiful texture with lustre. The sapwood is light reddish brown in colour. The heartwood is reddish ochre and looks like Huanghuali, and therefore it is called

blood beech [16, 18, 23]. The rare and magnificent tropic "hard" wood species (density bigger than 1), namely Zitan (*Pterocarpus santalinus* L.f), Huanghuali (*Dalbergia hainanensis*), and Tieli (*Mesua ferrea*), are used in the furniture of Su-styled furniture [14]. These woods are natural in colour, hard in texture, and have a natural beauty, so craftsmen usually do not use any finish in order to preserve this natural beauty. Materials used for inlays include ivory, mother-of-pearl, and jade. Because of the scarcity of this material, artisans used wood with great economy. This is also a reason why Su appears exquisite on the modelling of furniture.

2.1.3. Modelling and Style Features

Compared with the *Jing* and *Guang* styles, *Su* style furniture with a smaller size has a distinguished structure, a fluent line, a moderate scale, and delicate carving. These features are typical for the natural, elegant, and simple *Su* furniture style. Due to the high literary tradition of the region, the decoration themes of the *Su* furniture are bamboo, plum, pine, and flowers and birds. The inlays used for the *Su* furniture are mostly jade, all sorts of colourful stones, ivory, and mother-of-pearl used in small pieces for inlay. Large-sized carving of solid boards was not much implemented.

2.2. Jing-Styled Furniture

2.2.1. Cultural Background

The furniture made in the Beijing area, including Tianjin and Hebei (*Jing* for short), has a meticulous process and careful production, revealing royal

lordliness. In the Ming dynasty, the *Yongle* period in the year 1405, the Ming government started overseas trade exporting tea, silk, ceramics etc. and importing many tropical hard wood species (from the Philippines and the East Indies). These imported woods with high density (bigger than 1) have an attractive grain rich colour and are most used for *Jing*-styled furniture. In 1420, the Ming government moved the capital from Nanjing to Beijing; lots of excellent carpenters were introduced in Beijing from all of China (as seen in the palace Museum) [26]. These carpenters designed and made furniture to satisfy the needs of the royal family and the emperor, as well as the imperial aesthetic taste. During the late Ming dynasty, one emperor named *Zhu Youxiao* (1605-1627), who was a very famous carpenter, promoted the development of *Jing* furniture [4]. *Jing* style furniture rose in the middle and late Ming dynasty reaching a climax in the Qing dynasty, having two or three hundred years of history. The specific historical background determined *Jing* furniture to achieve a relatively high position ever since its initiation and to be thus situated in the mainstream position of ideology, social politics, and aesthetic thought.

2.2.2. Materials Used

The materials used for *Jing*-styled furniture were very exquisite, mainly a few precious "hard" woods such as Zitan (*Pterocarpus santalinus* L.f), Huanghuali (*Dalbergia hainanensis*), and rosewood (*Dalbergia bariensis*), although these wood species grow very slowly. Due to the rarity of these woods, only the imperial household was allowed to use Zitan and

Huanghuali in China from the 17th to the 19th century. According to the imperial workshop records, in the reign periods of Yongzheng and Qianlong (1723~1796), the Zitan supplies were scarce by the 18th century. From then on, rosewood began to be used to replace Zitan for fine furniture making. Although Hong-mu can be stained to resemble Zitan and worked to reproduce a fine black jade blade, a sun-warmed stone that true Zitan effuses, it can never have its density or weight. Huanghuali, literally 'yellow flowering pear,' a highly prized wood found in *Jing*-styled furniture, is not as rare as Zitan. It was available both within the boundaries of China, in such regions as Hainan Island and Guangdong province, and imported from South-East Asia, namely India, Burma, Sumatra, the Malay Archipelago, and the Philippine Islands [5, 6]. The colour, texture, and density of this fragrant wood from different locations vary accordingly.

2.2.3. Modelling and Style Features

Jing-styled furniture is relatively close to *Guang*-styled furniture in its modelling, which is elegant, beautiful, and dignified. The whole furniture line is exquisite and full of spirit, forming a unique example of royal orthodoxy. In *Jing*-style furniture, decoration from ancient bronze ware and jades was incorporated. It demonstrates the ancient sweet color, gentle and elegant artistic image, thus integrating perfectly material, craft, and design to satisfy the highest requirements for furniture art. Due to the fact that the users of *Jing*-styled furniture were mostly rulers and dignitaries, the makers did not hesitate to use materials and labour in the production process. For decoration, much

attention was paid to getting patterns from ancient jades and bronzes from the imperial collections and using them skillfully on the furniture. In doing so, the craftsmen achieved their best, making Jing style's luxurious air a characteristic feature.

2.3. Guang-Styled Furniture

2.3.1. Cultural Background

The furniture made in Guangdong (Guang for short) shows the influence of Western art. The Ancestral Temple of the Chen Family in Guangzhou has a display of *Guang*-styled furniture. Guangzhou was an important transport city along China's maritime Silk Road and one of the earliest commercial ports where western civilization entered China. Guangzhou is located in the rich and fertile Pearl River delta, where people lived and worked in peace and contentment, where commerce, economy, and various handicrafts (leather, ivory, jade, and metal hardware, etc.) were well developed, and resources of high-quality rosewood for furniture were abundant. In the Qing dynasty, the thirteen-Hong was set up in Guangzhou, which was a professional company dealing with foreign trade. After the Middle of the Qing dynasty, the rulers showed a strong desire for material life and for the influence of western culture, because the original style of Su style furniture could no longer meet their taste. The whole class of dignitaries and courtiers were in constant pursuit of luxury and wealth, especially after Yongzheng and Qianlong. The modelling of extensively made furniture and style accords with their aesthetic views. Su-style furniture was also replaced with a

clear, simpler type of furniture, extensively manufactured.

2.3.2. Materials Used

In contrast to the Su-style, Guang-style is unstinted in the use of material, and the furniture looks solid and massive. The most used wood species for Guang furniture was rosewood, although Zitan and Huanghuali were also used. Due to the rich wood resources in the Guangzhou area, Guang furniture was usually made of the same wood texture of uniform colour not mixed with other wood. Rosewood (*Dalbergia bariensis*) emits a strong sour odour when worked, so its equivalent southern Chinese term is "suan-zhi", literally meaning "sourwood" [5, 7, 19]. It can be stained easily. Its wood is moderately hard and heavy, which makes it easily workable. Because of the hot weather in Guangzhou, many Guang chairs were inlaid with marble.

2.3.3. Modelling and Style Features

Because of its special geographic location, this region had a relatively high degree of openness to the outside world. The extensively manufactured furniture is very similar to the artistic style of the western popular baroque type and the rococo type in its modelling, it contains some Western taste features; the general modeling is more of the lumbar shape. Stone material can be used to be encased in widely made furniture in great quantities. In order to meet the rulers' needs, like a certain atmosphere of luxury, Guang furniture affected by western culture was adorned according to the new trends. In the carving technique, the cutting method is soft, the grinding is fine,

the carved motifs are raised higher with some parts almost reaching the round carving, and the surface of the motifs is smooth as jade [2].

2.4. Jin-Styled Furniture

2.4.1. Cultural Background

The furniture made in Shanxi (Jin for short) is a harmonious blend of royal demeanour and local cultural heritage [24]. Located between the Yellow River and *Taihang* Mountain, Shanxi has favourable climatic conditions and abundant resources which are the link of material exchange inside and outside the Great Wall. Shanxi was one of the richest places in China during the Qing Dynasty, of which Rishengchang Exchange Shop in Pingyao, the earliest bank in China, is good evidence. With the increasing importance of Jin merchants, commercial symbols emerged, such as patterns concerning money and fortune. The ancient Ming and Qing Streets, Qiao Family Compound and Wang's Compound in Pingyao, Shanxi, provide sufficient testimony to the aesthetic and cultural achievement in Jin-style furniture.

2.4.2. Materials Used

The most used materials for Jin furniture are local wood species such as elm (*Ulmus rubra*), walnut (*Juglans mandshurica* Maxim), and locust (*Sophora japonica* Linn). Elm is the most popular wood for furniture in north China, as well as the principal wood for Jin-styled furniture. Elm and Chinese beech wood are the most commonly used woods for furniture in North and South China respectively, and are usually called "Northern elm, Southern

beech". Elm wood is tough and heavy. It has a rough structure with little flexibility, good elasticity, and moderate strength. It is superior in its resistance to humidity and corrosion and suitable for processing and carving. Walnut wood native to Shanxi is very delicate, stable, extremely easy to carve and inlay, with a light colour. It gets the lustre of hard wood after waxing and polishing, resembling huanghuali very closely [24].

2.4.3. Modelling and Style Features

Some Jin merchants visited Beijing and then wanted to imitate and design Jing furniture using the local wood material, because of transport problems. Jin furniture follows the Jing style, but unlike other styles, it has less engraving; instead, inlays of stone, porcelain and bone, which catch the eye more easily than exquisite engraving, are used to tell about the luxurious lifestyle of the owner. In addition, colour and gold painting reached the en vogue status, expressing the preferred gaudiness of the wealthy. Another feature of Jin-styled furniture is the widely applied layer of walnut wood.

2.5. Ning-Styled Furniture

2.5.1. Cultural Background

The furniture made in Ningbo (Ning for short) has graceful modelling, superb craftsmanship, in particular of inlay technology and striking colour (lacquered furniture). The culture of the Ningbo area originated from the Hemudu period (7,000 years ago) [9]. A bowl finished with Chinese lacquer and some wooden elements with mortise and tenon joints were discovered in the Yuyao site. As early

as the Tang dynasty, Ningbo was one of the four famous international ports of Chinese maritime Silk Road, as well as the origin port of East and Southeast Asian cultural and trading circle. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, Ningbo became the cultural centre of lacquer ware, woodcarving, furniture, and mah-jong.

2.5.2. Materials Used

Although the precious hard wood used for Ning furniture still depended on import, the lumber used for furniture that was stimulating the development of furniture manufacturing came from Ningbo local wood species, like camphor, beech, Chinese ash, and catalpa. Camphor wood has a hard and firm texture and stable properties. It is excellent for architecture and furniture due to the large size of the timber. It is also a popular wood for carving because of the colour of its surface, ranging from reddish brown to dark brown [3, 21, 22]. Its sections are smooth, with beautiful patterns and bright lustre. Its best-known features are the very volatile camphor oil and its special smell. The wood is durable and capable of resisting insects, moths, and rot. Therefore, camphor wood is popular for inset panels of furniture, as a surface ornament or for furniture used for storage such as chests, boxes, and cabinets. In addition, the lacquer and shells from sea resources in Ningbo have greatly enriched the decorative art of the Ning furniture.

2.5.3. Style Features

The main features of Ning furniture are inlaying, red lacquer, carving, and imitation of bamboo. The materials used for Ning furniture inlaying are ivory, bone

slice, shells, and copper slice. The inlaying patterns are generally landscapes, animals, people, and so on. Red lacquered furniture is very popular in the Ningbo area, especially red-golden carved lacquer for furniture made for newly-wedded couples. People love bamboo in the Ningbo area, as the poem *Sushi* from the Song dynasty reads “Better to eat without meat than live without bamboo”, so carved imitation bamboo furniture is also widespread.

2.6. Chuan-Styled Furniture

2.6.1. Cultural Background

The furniture made in the Sichuan area (Chuan for short) is simple, generous, smooth, comfortable, with a strong local favour as well as national, reflecting the local customs and culture. Sichuan is located in the Southwest region of China, having fertile land and abundant water, which is very suitable for growing crops, making it known as a land of abundance. As early as the Qin dynasty, Sichuan was a grain and tea production area. Sichuan is the birthplace of Taoism and an important place for spreading Buddhism. Sichuan is the culture centre in the Southwest region of China.

2.6.2. Materials Used

Chuan-styled furniture is mainly made from solid wood, common bamboo, *Nan* wood, cypress, cedar, and fir. In the Sichuan province, there are more than 140 species of bamboo from 18 families. Bamboo furniture is a life necessity for most people. *Nan* wood mainly grows in the provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan, Guangxi, Hunan, and Hubei. There are

many species of Nan wood, including Xiangnan wood (*Randi acanthioides*), which is light purple and has a pretty texture and a faint scent; *Jinsinan* wood, which has either golden filaments or a natural landscape or figure patterns in its texture; and *shuinan* wood, which is very soft and mainly used for cabinets, book stands, and ornaments on cabinet doors or pieces for study-room furniture. Nan wood feels soft to the touch. It has a bright and graceful lustre [22].

2.6.3. Style Features

Sichuan's unique natural environment and historical background provide the rich material resource and cultural heritage for the formation of Chuan-styled furniture. The style features are summarised as follows: Sichuan was an important area producing Chinese lacquer, so most *Chuan* style furniture was lacquered; Sichuan was an important agricultural centre in ancient China, sun-worshipping motifs are a common decoration for *Chuan* style furniture; many decorations demonstrate a religious orientation (Taoism, Confucianism or Buddhism).

3. Conclusions

Through the comparison of six main styles of Qing furniture, it can be found that each of the six furniture styles has its own cultural heritage. It can be concluded that Su furniture inherited features of Ming furniture; Jing furniture was influenced by royal tastes; Guang furniture absorbed western furniture decoration; Jin was followed by Jing furniture but used local materials; Ning furniture was good at inlaying and red-golden lacquered technology; Chuan

furniture has a strong local flavour and national flavour of Southwest. These analysed data can bring a contribution to the relevant scientific information needed for the identification, conservation, and restoration of historic Chinese furniture.

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