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RESEARCH ARTICLE

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE CHINESE TRADITIONAL FURNITURE

*Obed Persie Appiah-Kubi, Lv Jiufang and Wu Zhihui

College of Furnishings and Industrial Design, Nanjing Forestry University, Nanjing, 210037, China

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ABSTRACT

China, the world's fastest growing nation and among the first three world's ancient centers of civilization is celebrated for their knowledge in a diversity of specific visual craftwork. With long history of culture dating back to the rulers of remote ancient times, Chinese have excelled greatly in the furniture industry with an outstanding history. The long history of China has helped the nation to constantly strive to innovate, explore, and create new approaches that are essential in one's daily lives. The Chinese traditional furniture has come a very long way from the Shang dynasty to the Ming and Qing dynasty; producing with a low-quality material, rigid furniture form, short-legged, outmoded construction techniques, archaic finishing and primitive furniture items to using quality hardwoods, exquisite furniture designs and decorations, long-legged, advanced construction techniques, long-lasting finishing and classical furniture pieces. Today, the Chinese furniture items are not only used by people in power or the affluent, but also, found in the homes of the ordinary Chinese and in temples. Aside the internal cultural influence, external cultures also influenced the activities of the craftsmanship. Furniture items, especially beds, couches, cabinets, tables and desks have all migrated to a multifunctional artefact meeting the needs of customers. Till today, every furniture items produced has taken the shape and style of the Ming and Qing dynasty period of making furniture as those periods are the peak of China's furniture culture.

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INTRODUCTION

Chinese are celebrated for their knowledge in a diversity of specific visual craftwork. With long history of culture dating back to the rulers of remote ancient times, China is considered as one of the three world's ancient centers of civilization (Liu, 2007). Throughout its long history, the Chinese have constantly strived to innovate, explore, and create new approaches that are essential in one's daily lives, thanks to the diligence and intelligence of the ancient Chinese (Wei, and Xu, 2018). The ancient Chinese in their quest to making living easier and comfortable, resorted to making valuable and meaningful furniture items that served them seat, bed, table, storage item, but to mention a few. Furniture items made by the Chinese have gone through a long development to chase advanced aesthetic, elaborate, and spiritual level. Starting as stone and bronze furniture over thousand years ago, the Chinese traditional furniture has evolved from low-rise to high-rise wooden furniture items (Zhu, 2013; Zhang, 1998) with

complementary materials as beautification, following changes in their lifestyle and situational demand. It is therefore necessary to know the historical background behind the exquisite and classical furniture items China boost of today as the knowledge of the craftsmanship has travelled to other part of the globe.

HISTORY OVERVIEW

The Xia, Shang and Western Zhou Dynasties (2070-1600-771 BC): As opined by Geng (1999), the Xia, Shang and Western Zhou Dynasties was the birth time of traditional Chinese furniture. Historical records by Archaeologist have it that the Chinese had furniture even before the Shang Dynasty. According to Xu (2003) and Geng (1999), China entered the bronze age during the Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 BC) when sacrifices were being practiced. Furniture items discovered during this period were sacrificial objects and some few items primitively made to serve as seat, table, bed etc. to meet users' lifestyle. Aside stone, metal and bronze, materials like ivory, pine and other available materials to the ancient Chinese were used (Zhang, 2008). The use of wood was not really the basic material for production. Items produced during this era also included stands or hanger for lamps and bronze chopping

*Corresponding author: Obed Persie Appiah-Kubi,
Internal Medicine, California Institute of Behavioral Neuroscience
and Psychologist, Fairfield, USA.

block to slaughter animal through using a more primitive construction approach (Geng, 1999). The produced items had mysterious ornamental patterns and were lacquered to give it decorative finishing.

After the Shang Dynasty period was the Western Zhou Dynasty period. The Western Zhou Dynasty period (1046-771 BC) saw the furniture items produced during the Shang Dynasty period improved when advanced techniques like separate casting, welding, lost-wax casting emerging (Zhang, 1998).

Artists' working knowledge and creativity advanced leading to exquisite productions; a typical example is the square bronze table unearthed in Zhongshan Prince Cuo's Mausoleum designed with vivid shape and pattern of four dragons, four phoenixes, composed of a round base with patterns of four deer and an arch supporting the rim on both sides of the table (Zhang, 2008).

The Spring and Autumn Period & the Warring State Period (770-221 BC): The spring and Autumn period and the Warring state period saw an improvement in the living conditions of ancient Chinese and this led to an improvement in productivity (Zhang, 2008). The period according to Geng (1999), saw the artists accepting wood as an alternative material for production and there was an improvement in production techniques as large number of tools and equipment emerged to make the manufacturing of wooden furniture items easier (Zhu, 2013; Zhang, 2008) This era was the birth moment of short and low style furniture.

The main wooden furniture items produced were beds, desks, tables, screens, clothes racks and so on. The tables and chairs were produced short as a result of the ancient Chinese daily habits (Zhang, 2008). Sitting on the ground with knees crossed like the way Muslims pray at the mosque was very common in the homes of traditional Chinese. According to Zhang (2008), it is believed that, the oldest bed found till today is a king-sized bed, painted beautifully with symbolic patterns of clouds. This symbolic bed was designed to be supported by six feet. The bed was unearthed in Xinyang in the Henan Province.

According to Zhang (2008) as also confirmed by Zhu (2013), a carpenter by name Lu Ban invented the tools and equipment that enabled the artisans at that time to easily produce wooden furniture items. Invented tools and equipment were; saw, plane, drill, square, shovel, sink maker and so on and it brought convenient condition to manufacture furniture items. As technology improved, ancient Chinese furniture artists had the motivation to improve upon making furniture.

Lu Ban's great invention made him to be regarded as the father of artisans in China (Zhu, 2013; Zhang, 2008; Xu, 2003). Metallurgical technology advanced and this brought about significant changes in the processing and use of wood. Multiple joining using the tenon-and-mortise method emerged in the Warring State period as a significant character in the furniture produced by the Chinese (Xu, 2003). There was also an improvement in finishing produced furniture items as bronze was replaced with lacquer.



Source: www.instructables.com

Figure .1 Short legged Chinese furniture

The Qin and Han Dynasties (221BC- 220AD): According to Geng (1999), sitting on the ground was still a common practice during these periods, therefore the lifestyle propelled artisans to continually produce furniture mostly dwarf-style centered with the bed. The dwarf-style furniture was mostly less than 50 centimeters in height, and lacquered wooden furniture had become more predominant as bronze furniture was completely out of service (Xiong et al., 2017). At the Han dynasty period, several kinds of furniture; mats, couches, beds, chests, desks, tables, screens, cabinets and the huchuang were used. Most cabinets and chests used for storing things were usually small and beautiful, furniture did not have a permanent position and it was presented on ad hoc basis (Cao et al., 2004). The huchuang, a kind of seat was used on horses, it was foldable and portable, and according to Cao et al., (2004), huchuang seat finally advanced into a folding chair.

The Han Dynasty according to Liang (2000), marked the first China's golden age. According to him, beds used during this period were multifunctional, as they were not only used as beds but also served as dining tables and rest surface to receive guests. Zhang (2008), also made it known that, screens, curtains, glass and valuables including gold, silver and copper jewelry were incorporated in the beds to make them appear more beautiful to display the status and wealth of the user. Although beds' height was not mostly above 50 centimeters, couches produced during this period were smaller and lower than beds (Wei and Xu, 2018) and about one or two people could sit on them, as it served as seats for guests. Finishing with traditional lacquer painting advanced to using embossed lacquer technique, which uses stiff lacquer to create patterns (Geng, 1999). The period laid a firm basis for a higher and longer legs furniture in the future.



Source: www.dreamstime.com

Figure 2. Multifunctional bed

The Wei, Jin and Northern and Southern Dynasties (220 AD- 581AD): The period saw exchange of culture and ethnic cultural fusion (Xiong et al., 2017; Li, 2003). According to Wu (2013), the Indians introduced Buddhism; which is the world's

fourth-largest religion to the Chinese as the introduction gave rise to new and improved forms of furniture. Indoor space increased as a result of improvement in architecture.

The posture of sitting changed and the dwarf-style furniture started progressing into high furniture (Zhang, 2008), people began to sit the way we do today there by making the high furniture type popular. According to Zhang, though dwarf-style furniture existed, furniture adopted new shape and structures. New furniture articles produced were; stools with wrap-around arms, long stools, armchairs, round tables, wardrobes to mention but a few. Bed's height was also greatly raised and people could sit on or at the edge for their legs to hang. Beds were further modified to have crest, dismountable screens and curtains to make them look more beautiful with lotus flower patterns as decorations (Zhang, 2008) and this kind was mostly owned by the affluent in the society.

According to Zhu (2013) and Zhang (1998), it was during this period that metal fittings were integrated in some furniture items, example is the wooden chest unearthed in the year 1982 from the tomb of the Eastern Jin Dynasty in Yutaizi of the Liaoning Province (Zhang, 1998). Another technique emerged during this era was the new lacquer mixing. Decorative methods like carved silver and gold ribbon, dark green lacquer, variegated lacquer and lacquer painting made furniture items produced more splendid (Zhang, 2008).

The Sui, Tang and the Five Dynasties (581- 618- 960 AD):

There were no palpable changes in furniture items during the Sui Dynasty though reigned for a period of 37 years (581-618 AD) as according to Zhang (2008) and Liu (2007). The Tang and the Five Dynasties reigned for 342 years (618-960 AD) and saw a momentous development in furniture (Geng, 1999). High-legged furniture type existed with the dwarf-style and went through great changes. The high-legged furniture was maturing each passing day. The real time of prosperity was at the Tang Dynasty as furniture for high profile people rapidly developed and became famous with the upper class. The period saw an extraordinarily thriving culture and a stable social order migrated furniture to a new historical stage (Liang, 2000). Though there was lack of change in technology and variety, the rigid and rough furniture design characteristics advanced to pursuing free patterns and a fresh designs paving way for a more magnificent and elegance structures (Zhang, 2008; Liang, 2000).

Furniture items produced at this time was intricately carved and had Chinese landscape paintings, paintings of flowers and beautiful patterns. There were not many changes to the type of bed. It was dominated by box-type beds, terrace beds rack screens and independent sofas. Like the production of drum stools started in the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern dynasties, the pattern of drum stools diversified. Patterns like the round-shaped and the crescent-shaped drum stool emerged, while lacquering and painting techniques made furniture look more stunning. The Japanese according to Liu (2017), learnt some furniture techniques, styles and decoration methods from the Chinese as great impact was made during the Tang dynasty. It was at this era that the Chinese furniture systematically developed as it were grouped into; furniture for sitting and lying, furniture for supporting and placing other articles and for storage (Zhang, 2008).

The Song and Yuan Dynasties (960- 1368 AD): The Song dynasty ruled a time of economic and cultural prosperity providing a meaningful social environment for appositive development of the furniture industry (Zhang, 2008; Xu, 2003; Geng, 1999). Sitting on chairs became common and a habit as high furniture-type predominated and was accepted into the lifestyles of ordinary families (Zhang, 2008; Geng, 1999). Centering on tables, stools and chairs, there was adopted patterns of furniture production and its use during the Song Dynasty. Song and Yuan periods were an important development stages in the history of Chinese furniture (Wei and Xu, 2018; Zhu, 2002). Several types of high-legged furniture came into the limelight. Couch, desks, beds, stools, tables, cabinet, chest, towel stands, clothes stand and many more furniture items had been recognized and enhanced upon. As chairs with high-leg emerged, the back of the chair was also designed to have a high back to aid comfortability with it use (Zhu, 2013). It was during this period that Yanji, a desk kind emerged and according to old history, it was the first furniture piece in the world to be assembled (Zhang, 2008). The tenon-and-mortise structure in furniture was adopted. This exquisite technique has continuously improved both in style and shape.

Relatively, the Yuan dynasty was a short period (1271-1368) as compared to the Song dynasty. Furniture style during this period was outstanding and strong in style and was luxuriously required for pleasures. Furniture items made during the period were rough in style, had interesting shapes, huge, carved and heavily decorated. Beds and couches were made to look massive (Zhu and Zhang, 2012; Zhang, 1998). Following the pattern and style of furniture of the Song period, tables produced during this period were improved a little as using tables with high legs became very common and tables were designed to serve multi-purpose having drawers inclusive in the piece. This became a great invention during this period as furniture, tables to be precise enhanced its function.



Source: www.oldwoodenstool.com

Figure 3. Old Chinese stool



Source: www.caseantiques.com

Figure 4. Modern Chinese stool

The Ming and Qing Dynasty (1368-1644-1912 AD): It was during the Ming dynasty period that the ban on imports was lifted and this gave rise to commerce of hardwood of vast quantities in the Chinese market (Xiong et al., 2017; Zhu, 2002). Before the ban was lifted, local woods used for furniture production by the traditional Chinese were beech, tieli, elm, hetao wood and chai wood; referred to as firewood (Wu, 2013; Zhang, 1998). According to Zhang (2008) and Liu (2007), some imported hardwoods that entered the Chinese market for furniture production included; hong wood (rose wood), zitan wood and huanghuali (huali/hualu) wood. Rose wood is generally red in colour, zitan; black in colour and the huanghuali; yellow in colour. From time immemorial, the zitan wood, the hardest and heaviest has been highly valued like gold, and till today, a furniture piece made from zitan signifies luxury and wealth (Zhang, 2008; Xu, 2003), and it is believed that the affluent can own such pieces. All these woods when used for furniture production gave and it is still giving a distinctive design that are very pleasant in the eyes of the people.

According to Wei and Xu (2018), the period saw maturity in Chinese furniture and it reached its peak, and much attention was on the quality of materials used with exquisite grain, beautiful texture and high intensity. Produced furniture items were characterized by exquisite patterns, elegant and classical style and were very durable because of the imported wood kind. As opined by Zhang (2008), artistic touch was integrated with practicality to come up with exquisite furniture designs. During the Ming dynasty period, furniture items were categorized into; chairs and stools, beds and couches, tables and desks, platforms and stands, chest and cabinets, screens etc. (Zhang, 2008; Liu, 2007). Making of furniture items in different shapes were allowed but it should conform to physical types and needs of users. The tenon-and-mortise technique of joining wood parts was adopted instead of using nail and gum (Wu, 2013; Zhang, 2008) and all kinds of molding techniques; carving, chasing, drawing and inlaying with gold and silver were also adopted. Materials like bamboo, enamel, jade, mother of pearl, ivory were all used as ornamental materials for complementary furnishings (Xiong et al., 2017). Decorative effects were made possible through the employment of metal handles, metal hinges and fasteners. Furniture items became distinctive in features and style as craftsmanship was advanced.

After the Ming Dynasty period came the Qing dynasty period. The Qing dynasty period was a golden age for China (Wu, 2013; Zhang, 2008; Zhang, 1998). Furniture produced during this era were increased by large production and were mostly designed and produced for bedrooms, halls or study needs. Comparatively, the Qing furniture style are larger, vigorous in style, rich and dignified as compared to the Ming furniture style (Zhang, 2008; Zhu, 2002). According to Xiong *et al.*, (2017) and Zhang (2008), the Ming style furniture of hardwood and the Qing style furniture epitomizes the peak of Chinese classical furniture and formed a world-famous classical style. Till today, every furniture items produced has taken the shape and style of the Ming and Qing dynasty period of making furniture. Modern civilization has widened the knowledge of artisans to explore the use of more hardwoods and again, civilization has also enhanced the style and decoration, technique of production and the finishing processes.



A,B,C, Figure 5: Ming and Qing dynasty furniture
Source: www.1stdibs.com/ www.wsimag.com

CONCLUSION

The Chinese traditional furniture has come a very long way from producing with a low-quality material, rigid furniture form, short-legged, outmoded construction techniques and an archaic finishing to using quality hardwoods, exquisite furniture designs and decorations, long-legged, advanced construction techniques and long-lasting finishing. Today, the Chinese furniture items are not only used by people in power or the affluent, but also, found in the homes of the ordinary Chinese and in temples. Aside the internal cultural influence, external cultures also influenced the activities of the craftsmanship. Furniture items, especially beds, couches, cabinets, tables and desks have all migrated to a multifunctional artefact meeting the needs of customers. Till today, every furniture items produced has taken the shape and style of the Ming and Qing dynasty period of making furniture as those periods are the peak of China's furniture culture.

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