

Excerpted from

*Austere
Luminosity of
Chinese
Classical
Furniture*

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INTRODUCTION

A Taste for Austere Luminosity

The harmonious simplicity of form and the sheen of polished hardwood endow Chinese classical furniture with an austere luminosity. That light lies on the surface and in the wooden heart of the pieces and gives them their plain magnificence. The twentieth century discovered this furniture as art, and this reevaluation commanded the attention of private collectors, museums, and scholars. These wood objects, which I perceive as functional sculptures, effectively generated a taste for austere luminosity.

Chinese classical furniture, also known as Ming-style furniture, is made from dense hardwoods valued for their grain patterns and natural beauty. The materials, design, and workmanship are of the highest quality. In the twentieth century this furniture was called classical because, as Laurence Sickman pointed out in a 1978 lecture before the Oriental Ceramic Society, its basic structure descends directly from antiquity and possesses the traits of restraint, balance, and grandeur that are associated with a classical style in any medium or culture.¹ Classical, in this sense, refers to a style and an aesthetic taste rather than necessarily to a particular period. Scholars and connoisseurs have appropriated the epithet *classical* to accord high esteem to plain hardwood (as opposed to ornate, lacquer, and softwood) furniture. Recently the word *vernacular* has been adopted to distinguish later softwood furniture from classical hardwood pieces.²

In China once a form was created it continued to exist as a viable artistic possibility for later imitation and development. So while the classical furniture style had its main origins in the Song dynasty (960–1279), it did not reach its apogee until the late Ming and early Qing dynasties (c. 1550–1735). Only in the mid sixteenth century did the Chinese begin to use hardwoods widely for furniture; this is the period when they lifted the ban on maritime trade and began importing large quantities of tropical hardwoods from Southeast Asia. The use of hardwoods permitted the creation of austere, slender-legged chairs and tables relying on the lustrous beauty of the precious wood for their decorative effect. This classical hardwood furniture was, however, only one of the furniture styles found in the cul-

tured homes of the rich. Plain lacquered pieces were especially prized, as were polychrome, carved, and inlaid lacquer pieces. In addition there was an abundance of ceramic stools, pieces fashioned from gnarled branches or roots, and even light bamboo furniture, which hardwood pieces sometimes imitated.

One associates classical furniture with the wealthy social elite, especially the literati or scholar-officials who, after passing rigorous examinations in the Confucian classics, obtained coveted government positions. The literati were the most educated and cultured members of society as well as the most respected artists, writers, and connoisseurs of refined taste. Of course, classical furniture was also found in the palace and in the houses of wealthy merchants who aspired to imitate the literati life and tastes. The rich typically lived in compounds with their wives, concubines, and extended family members. The compounds, surrounded by high windowless walls, had rooms opening onto interior courtyards. Directly inside the front entrance a screening wall prevented outsiders from seeing, through an open door, into the house. These walls enclosed and separated the inner world of the family from the public domain.

This spatial arrangement of the house reflected the Confucian family system, which prescribed rigid rules for gender segregation. These rules of conduct were expounded by eleventh-century Neo-Confucians, including Sima Guang, and later became the ideal way of life. Sima wrote: “The men are in charge of all affairs on the outside; the women manage the inside affairs. During the day, without good reason the men do not stay in their private rooms nor the women go beyond the inner door.”³

The front courtyard was the male part of the compound, where male visitors were received. Behind were the women’s quarters, into which no males, except for family members and servants, were supposed to venture. The house had a north-south orientation, with the most important rooms along the main axis facing south toward the sun. Long covered walkways connected the buildings and courtyards, and overhanging eaves formed covered verandas. Since it was

usually necessary to go outside when going from room to room, these covered walkways and verandas provided protection from both the sun and bad weather.

While much of the furniture in these rooms could be used interchangeably in various parts of the compound, other pieces were designed to be used in a specific area. For instance, large canopy beds decorated with auspicious motifs for the birth of many sons belonged in a woman’s bedroom, while washbasin stands were placed in a bedroom rather than the reception hall. The more decorated pieces were considered suitable for the women’s quarters, while the more austere pieces were appropriate for a gentleman’s study. Aesthetic and practical criteria determined the place of every piece of furniture in the house.

Great pieces of Chinese furniture are objects of stunning beauty whose measure places them not only among the so-called decorative arts but with the practical art of architecture as well. Indeed, many pieces of furniture—cabinets and canopy beds, for example—use not only some of the same design features as architecture but are also similar in joinery and engineering. In these aspects the cabinet or canopy bed is a microcosm of the house. Both furniture and architecture are fully functional. Clearly the patronizing and confining term *decorative art* is a misleading frame for classifying the functional art of Chinese classical furniture.

In daily life, furniture must fulfill the basic needs of supporting and containing. So a desk or dining table must be sturdy and provide ample leg room for those seated around it. And a bed should have a comfortable soft-mat seat with a firm yet yielding surface. Cabinets for storing large scrolls have removable central stiles so that a scroll can be easily inserted and will not fall out when the doors open. A single piece of furniture, depending on time and situation, can be used for many purposes. A long side table with everted flanges, for example, may stand under a painting in a reception room and hold an incense burner and a vase of flowers. But when there is a death in

the family, the same table may be used as an altar table for performing the funerary rites. And on occasion it is pulled out into the middle of the room to serve as a desk for scholars seated on either side.

When created by highly skilled craftsmen, this furniture is often infused with an artistic force that transcends the bounds of time and place. These functional sculptures in wood are thus as much at home in a contemporary American house as they were in the Chinese dwelling for which they were created. The finest pieces are imaginative and harmonious variations of a long tradition. They have an energy, unity, and beauty not found in routinely reproduced copies. In contrast to the place of furniture in the rest of the world, Chinese furniture distinctly incorporates other arts in addition to architecture. So a Chinese screen may contain a painting or poem, and at once we have calligraphy, poetry, and painting. In furniture the balance between the lines of the solid members and the spaces between them embodies the same aesthetic principles as calligraphy. And furniture shares with ceramics, metalwork, and textiles a decorative vocabulary of auspicious characters and pictorial motifs.

The concept of Chinese classical furniture is a twentieth-century phenomenon. Its international appreciation originated during the 1920s and '30s among foreign residents of Beijing who were influenced by the Bauhaus aesthetics of their time and bought this type of furniture for their own homes. Thus began a new appreciation of Chinese furniture that replaced the previous emphasis on lacquer and more ornately carved pieces. Collectors concentrated on the acquisition of classical furniture, which became the center of study, connoisseurship, and exhibition. At that time, though, only a few Chinese connoisseurs owned classical furniture, it was not a major field for collecting, and there was no Chinese research on the subject. The first books on classical furniture were written in English and based on the furniture in the Beijing homes of foreigners. These were Gustav Ecke's *Chinese Domestic Furniture*, published in a limited Shanghai edition in 1944, and George Kates's 1948

New York publication of *Chinese Household Furniture*. When events leading to the Communist takeover in 1949 forced foreigners to leave China, some of their furniture was brought to the West and set the standard for private and museum collections.

After returning to the United States in 1941, George Kates introduced Chinese hardwood furniture to interior decorators, furniture designers, and those interested in the arts through his lectures, magazine articles, book, and an exhibition of pieces from his own collection at the Brooklyn Museum in 1946. Gustav Ecke, who had become a professor at the University of Hawaii and a curator at the Honolulu Academy of Arts, was instrumental in promoting an interest in Chinese furniture on the islands and organized an exhibition there in 1952. Laurence Sickman, another former resident of Beijing, began a major collection at the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City, which soon became a mecca for those interested in Chinese furniture.

In the 1960s permanent furniture galleries were installed in the Nelson-Atkins Museum and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, whose collection was cataloged by Jean Gordon Lee. C. P. FitzGerald published *Barbarian Beds: The Origin of the Chair in China*, continuing the historical study of the Chinese chair begun over a decade earlier by Louise Hawley Stone in *The Chair in China*. The 1970s began with the appearance of *Chinese Furniture: Hardwood Examples of the Ming and Early Ch'ing Dynasties*, by Robert Ellsworth, the collector and dealer most responsible for establishing the *huanghuali* furniture market in the United States. In 1978 Sickman gave his influential lecture "Chinese Classic Furniture" when he was awarded the Hills Gold Medal in London. The following year the French connoisseur Michel Beurdeley published *Chinese Furniture*, which discusses furniture made from lacquer, enamel, porcelain, and bamboo as well as hardwood.

China's opening to the outside world in the 1980s led to a tremendous surge of interest in Chinese furniture. Wang Shixiang, who was the son of a Chinese diplomat and had been part of the Beijing in-

ternational community before the Revolution, began to reestablish contacts with foreign friends and in 1985 published *Classic Chinese Furniture*, which appeared the next year in English and then French and German translations. This book, the culmination of forty years of collecting and research, is the first written by a Chinese on classical furniture and the first to illustrate pieces from Chinese collections. It includes some pieces more ornate than what Westerners had come to regard as Ming-style furniture. Wang's book had a great impact on the field and the marketplace. Pieces began coming out of China through Hong Kong, and Chinese and foreign collectors became increasingly interested in classical furniture. In 1988 the Victoria and Albert Museum in London published Craig Clunas's enlightened *Chinese Furniture*. The decade ended with the publication of *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture: Ming and Early Qing Dynasties*, an expanded, more scholarly version of Wang Shixiang's book. An English edition appeared the following year.

In 1990 the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture opened in Renaissance, California. Founded by the Fellowship of Friends in the Sierra Nevada foothills of northern California, this museum was the only one in the world devoted exclusively to Chinese furniture. To promote the study and appreciation of furniture, the fellowship also published the quarterly *Journal of the Classical Chinese Furniture Society*.

Meanwhile in Asia a growing interest in classical furniture led to exhibitions and the first international symposia. In the fall of 1991 the Art Gallery of the Chinese University of Hong Kong exhibited the Dr. S. Y. Yip collection, accompanied by a catalog and symposium, and there was the first display of Ming furniture in the Hong Kong Museum of Art, which had recently moved to new premises. In November the First International Symposium of Chinese Ming Domestic Furniture, organized by Chen Zengbi, was held in Beijing in memory of Gustav Ecke. In addition, five exhibitions were arranged by the China Arts and Crafts Museum, the Central Academy of Arts and Design, the Association of Classical Chinese

Furniture, and the Beijing Arts and Crafts Association. For the first time the Palace Museum, in a recently opened section, displayed its classical furniture. Many scholars, collectors, dealers, and craftsmen from all over China attended these events, evidence of the new and rapidly expanding field. Furniture in China was at last accepted as part of the artistic tradition. The next year the private Tsui Museum added a room of *huanghuali* furniture when it opened in Hong Kong. When the new Shanghai Museum opened in 1996, special furniture galleries included pieces from the newly acquired Wang Shixiang collection.

In October 1992 the Second International Symposium on Chinese Ming Domestic Furniture was held in Suzhou in memory of Yang Yao, a collector and skilled draftsman who did the drawings for Ecke's book. A few weeks later the first American symposium, sponsored by the San Francisco Craft and Folk Art Museum, took place in San Francisco in conjunction with an exhibition of pieces from local collections.

San Francisco was again the site of a Chinese furniture exhibition in 1995–96, when the collection from the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture was shown at the Pacific Heritage Museum and a catalog published. The *Journal of the Classical Chinese Furniture Society* ceased publication at the end of 1994, and in September 1996 the museum's entire collection was sold at Christie's in New York for unprecedented sums. The collection had been formed during the 1980s and '90s, when many excellent pieces of classical furniture were coming out of China.

Other private collections were also formed in various parts of the world, including Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore. In late 1996 Robert Ellsworth published a catalog of the Hong Kong collection of Mimi and Ray Hung, and the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco exhibited many of the pieces in 1998. The Alice and Bob Piccus collection was sold at Christie's in New York in 1997.⁴ There has been an obvious trend to make significant collections known through publication, exhibition, and sale.

As interest in classical furniture grows, there has re-

cently been an increasing interest in softwood, bamboo, and later Chinese furniture as well. In 1996 the Peabody–Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, held the first exhibition of Chinese vernacular furniture, “Friends of the House: Furniture from China’s Towns and Villages,” with a catalog by Nancy Berliner and myself. Concurrently the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston opened with Nancy Berliner’s “Beyond the Screen: Chinese Furniture of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” which included lacquer, root, and other styles together with the classical. This exhibition was also accompanied by an affordable catalog. Then, in 1998, pieces from the Kai-Yin Lo collection were shown at the Asian Civilization Museum in Singapore and published in *Classical and Vernacular Chinese Furniture in the Living Environment*.⁵ Classical furniture began to be seen as just one significant part of the Chinese furniture tradition, and the full richness and complexity of that tradition began to be explored.

This book had its origins in the high-spirited rediscovery of classical furniture in the 1990s and developed from a series of articles I wrote about pieces in the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture. My intention is to give a sense of the world of which this furniture was a part as well as the art, craft, function, and historical precursors of these pieces. So with a New Historical nudge I hope to bring these pieces alive, dealing with them as intrinsic works of art as well as placing them in a social and historical context.

The first chapter deals with the most important event in the history of Chinese furniture: the adoption of the chair-level mode of seating. *Mat-level mode* and *chair-level mode* are terms I developed some years ago as a helpful way of understanding the historical revolution from mat to chair, which decisively changed the development of furniture as well as the lifestyle that the presence of high chairs and high tables permits.⁶ The next chapters discuss the twentieth-century vogue for Chinese classical furniture and the life of an important early collector, George Kates. Each subsequent chapter elaborates one type of furniture,

tracing its historical antecedents and discussing its function, social significance, and cultural associations; I further examine the pieces’ form, aesthetics, material, construction, and relation to similar examples. First, various types of seats are considered: the yoke-back chair, the folding armchair, the lowback armchair, and the stool. Then there are chapters on the platform, couchbed, and canopy bed, all of which serve as seats during the day and beds at night. Next are chapters on tables (the *kang* table, square table, desk, and side table), cabinets and shelves, and screens. The book concludes with separate chapters on the incense stand, lamp stand and lantern, braziers, and washstands.

In this book I make extensive use of sources, including excavated materials, literary texts, and visual representations in paintings, woodblock prints, stone engravings, and other media. I do so in part because the few extant examples of Chinese furniture dating before the mid sixteenth century were mostly excavated from tombs. Some tomb pieces were actually used by the deceased during their lifetime, but others, both full size and miniature models, were made expressly for burial. Because of the paucity of actual pieces from the early periods, I look at all these visual and textual sources for clues about the historical development and social role of furniture. Visual and textual sources also provide information about the contexts in which the many extant Ming and early Qing pieces of furniture were used, giving an idea of their function and placement, their relation to other objects in the interior, the meaning of their decoration, and their social significance. I concentrate on these matters as well as on artistic and technical aspects rather than on traditional dating, provenance, and stylistic development, which are problematic with so few firmly dated pieces and little information about regional characteristics. Even dated excavations and textual and visual sources all provide only *terminus ad quem* dates for the unearthed and depicted objects, since older objects were often used by later generations.

Objects excavated from tombs, visual sources, and

textual sources are not literal documents and cannot be used uncritically. Created in a particular context for a specific purpose, they were not mere transcriptions of reality. The creators had their own agenda. For instance, a couchbed found in a tomb may appear fine but have weak joints and be unable to withstand everyday use. This does not mean that beds used in daily life were actually made this way or that the carpenter who made the tomb bed was unskilled; rather, it means that this tomb bed was never intended to be used. Similarly, when we see exaggeratedly elevated canopied beds in the Dunhuang cave paintings, their height indicates status rather than the height of actual beds. Or when in a woodblock illustration depicting the reception hall of a house the only furnishings are two chairs in front of a screen, we cannot conclude that halls were sparsely furnished; perhaps only the significant elements of the scene are shown. Likewise, a literary account may refer to an ideal rather than an actual world, a past era rather than a contemporary one.

Chinese classical furniture touches on the arts of painting, poetry, calligraphy, and relief sculpture, and in its form and construction incorporates the principles of traditional wooden architecture. With a glance at the Bauhaus, we see that the furniture anticipates the plane-surfaced buildings of the twentieth century in Germany, France, and the United States. The range of Chinese furniture is unique and immense. The invention of a thoroughly distinctive way of supporting and containing people and things within the household is one of China's singular contributions. More revealing is the nature of that contribution, which I have placed in the sharp light of austere luminosity. The pieces create compelling spaces both around and within their forms. The magical totality of Chinese classical furniture, from its rich surfaces and shrewd proportions down to the austere soul of art that resides in the hardwood interiors, commands our eyes to witness each piece as a solitary work. Then we see a structure of fine wood sculptured by light.

1 | RISING FROM MAT TO CHAIR

A Revolution in Chinese Furniture

China was the only nation in East Asia, indeed the only nation outside the West, to adopt the chair-level mode of living before the modern period. This fact has intrigued visitors to China since at least the early seventeenth century, when the Jesuit Nicolas Trigault noted this radical departure from non-Western habit.¹ From the earliest times until about the tenth century the Chinese commonly sat on mats or low platforms. Although from at least the Eastern Zhou period (770–221 B.C.) people occasionally sat on an elevated seat with their legs pendant, only in the Northern Song dynasty (960–1126) did sitting on a chair at a high table become the norm. The adoption of the chair-level mode of living wrought a revolution in Chinese furniture. Indeed, it profoundly transformed many aspects of Chinese life, for the way a people sit and how they hang their legs affect not only the shapes and sizes of chairs and tables, but also wall heights, architecture, and social and eating habits. Raising the height of furniture elevates the vision and has implications for the spirit as well. No longer was the high seat a privilege reserved for the emperor and a few priests and officials. As wealth in China dispersed, the adoption of the chair was both symbol and product of a new prosperity that entailed an entirely new mode of living.

Height and authority are often correlated. In English we speak of rising to power or being elevated to a position. We talk about the seat of authority. High judges sit on the bench. The chair and table, in particular, are among the oldest symbols of authority. For the Greeks the *catheidra*, meaning “seat,” was the synonym of power, and for Christians it was the cathedral. In royal societies the name of the king or queen might change, but the symbol of authority remains the throne (from the Greek *thronos*).

In ancient China most people sat and slept on mats (*xi*), a custom reflected in the modern word for chairperson (*zhuxi*), which literally means “master of the mats.” However, even in early times there was a minor distinction in level, since the wealthy and important also had low platforms. From as early as the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 220) there are pictorial examples of what I call the mat-level mode of living. An Eastern Han (A.D. 25–220)



1.1

FIGURE 1.1 Lecture scene. Eastern Han dynasty. Rubbing from pottery relief from a tomb near Chengdu, Sichuan. Height 40 cm, length 46 cm. Chongqing Museum. Photo courtesy of the Chinese Culture Foundation, San Francisco.

pottery tomb tile unearthed near Chengdu in Sichuan province shows respectful, formally dressed students seated in the correct kneeling posture on long rectangular mats and a square single-person mat (fig. 1.1). The mats are made of woven rushes or bamboo, which might be lacquered red or black and bound with silk. The teacher, as befits his status, is elevated on a small low platform of simple box construction; he leans on an armrest (*ji*), which on each side has four curved legs attached to a runner. Seating is arranged according to a complex protocol reflecting social position and having symbolic, and sometimes even political, implications.²

During the Han dynasty, platforms could be small, like this one, or long enough to accommodate a num-

ber of people. Both large and small platforms often had screens on two sides, such as those depicted in the stone engravings at Anqiu, Shandong province (see fig. 9.1), and in the offering shrines of General Zhu Wei. Sometimes platforms are covered by canopies. For instance, a wall painting found in a tomb in Mi county, Henan province, shows a feast in progress, with the occupant of the tomb probably among those seated in the place of honor beneath a large canopy hung with patterned silk and bedecked with flags.³ In front of him, level with his seat, is a long low table with curved legs, a larger model of the armrest in the lecture scene (see fig. 1.1), laden with sumptuous dishes. The guests are arranged on mats in a huge U shape before the table.

A rare early platform belonging to Chang Taiguan, a fourth-century B.C. ruler of the kingdom of Chu, was found at Xinyang, Henan province (fig. 1.2). It is an elegant and sophisticated piece consisting of a black-lacquered wooden frame, 218.2 centimeters long and 139 centimeters wide, decorated along the outer edge with a red carved key-fret design. The frame is supported by six short legs elaborately carved in the form of double scrolls or coiled snakes. The legs tenon into the frame, a method of construction basic to all Chinese furniture. A low bamboo railing, mounted in bronze and wound with silk, encloses all but a slightly off-center portion of each of the long sides. Transverse braces originally supported some kind of seat. This type of large low platform, called a *chuang* in contemporaneous literature, was a daytime seat, often ceremonial, as well as a bed at night. A bamboo pillow and lacquer armrest were found in the same tomb, suggesting that these objects were for nighttime and daytime use on the *chuang*.⁴

When the Chinese lived at mat level, they used numerous kinds of small low tables. A Han dynasty pottery tomb tile depicts a feast with music and dancing for entertainment (fig. 1.3). On the left a musician plays the zither (*se*) for a guest seated on the far right. In the background sits a woman, identified by her double hair knot. They are watching a slow dance performed by a dancer dressed in a trailing, long-sleeved



1.2



1.3

FIGURE 1.2 Reproduction of a bed. Fourth century B.C. Excavated in 1956 from tomb no. 1, Xinyang, Henan. Platform: lacquered wood; railing: bamboo, bronze, and silk. Length 218.2 cm, width 139 cm. From Henan Sheng Wenwu Yanjiusuo, *Xinyang Chumu*, pl. 30.1.

FIGURE 1.3 Feasting and dancing. Eastern Han dynasty. Rubbing from pottery relief from a tomb in Chengdu, Sichuan. Height 40 cm, length 48.5 cm. Chengdu Museum. Photo courtesy of the Chinese Culture Foundation, San Francisco.



1.4



1.5

FIGURE 1.4 Kitchen preparations. Eastern Han dynasty. Rubbing from pottery relief from a tomb in Xindu county, Sichuan. Height 25.5 cm, length 44.5 cm. Xindu County Cultural Bureau. Photo courtesy of the Chinese Culture Foundation, San Francisco.

FIGURE 1.5 Estate, Eastern Han dynasty. Rubbing from pottery relief from a tomb in Chengdu, Sichuan. Height 39.5 cm, length 47 cm. Chengdu Museum. Photo courtesy of the Chinese Culture Foundation, San Francisco.

robe. A man beats out the rhythm on a drum. In front of each feaster is a small rectangular table for serving food. One common type is a low painted lacquer model with four wood or metal feet in the shape of stylized hooves. A luxurious example was excavated from the first- or early-second-century Tomb of the Painted Basket at Lelang, near modern Pyongyang, Korea.⁵ Lelang was a Chinese commandery at the time, and this table, like other inscribed pieces from the same site, was probably made in Sichuan province in China. The top of the table is decorated with undulating patterns of clouds, animals, and immortals framed by geometric borders; all are delicately executed in gold, silver, and other colors against a red ground. The legs are shaped like stylized hooves and ornamented in red and yellow.

Dining tables were often small enough to be carried from the kitchen already set with dishes. A low rectangular rimmed model holding cups, an oval bowl with two handles for wine, chopsticks, and dishes with remains of food (see fig. 12.4) was excavated from the tomb of the Marquess of Dai, who died soon after 168 B.C. Both table and dishes were costly, being lacquered red and black with painted decoration.

Different sizes of low rectangular tables, often with curved legs, were used in the kitchen. A long model is shown in a rubbing from an Eastern Han pottery tomb relief unearthed in Xindu, Sichuan province (fig. 1.4). Here two cooks preparing a meal are seated on the ground in front of a rack from which joints of meat are hung. On the right a person is fanning the fire, and behind him the dishes are laid out on small tables identical to those before the feasters in the banquet scene in fig. 1.3. A large curved-leg table—the earliest example of the type known to exist—was excavated from the Tomb of the Painted Basket.⁶ It uses the basic Chinese joinery that has persisted to the present day. On each short side of the table, five bent legs tenon into transverse braces beneath the top and a scalloped runner at the bottom. Exposed tenons are visible on the surface of the table as well as on the underside of the runner.

The mat-level mode of living clearly influenced the houses that people lived in at this time. The low furniture was neither abundant nor highly specialized, and it could be moved easily to serve several functions. It determined the proportions of the house, which might have one or more stories, and the lack of division into rooms. A pottery tomb relief depicting a Chengdu estate shows an entire compound surrounded by a wall with tiled eaves (fig. 1.5). The front gate (lower left) opens into a courtyard with fowl, and on the right is the kitchen with a well, stove, and rack similar to the one in fig. 1.4. In the courtyard behind the kitchen stands a tower that probably served as a watchtower and, according to contemporary literature, was also used for pleasure viewing.⁷ Beneath the tower a servant and a dog face a roofed wall or corridor leading to the main courtyard. A visitor would enter the front gate and cross the barnyard, in which we see a fowl, and then cross into the main courtyard, with the reception room at the far end. Steps lead up to the three-bayed building with fluted columns where the master of the house and his guests are seated on mats watching the dancing cranes—symbols of immortality and longevity—in the courtyard.

The building has no interior divisions, but screens would have been used to divide the space, protect from drafts and sunlight, and serve as marks of honor behind distinguished persons. A screen found in the tomb of the Marquess of Dai (see fig. 16.2) consists of two feet supporting a lacquered wood panel. One side is painted with a red dragon intertwined with clouds on a black ground; the other has a jade disk in the center surrounded by a black geometric pattern on a red ground. Both sides have identical patterned borders.

The interiors of the houses of the rich had brick floors and textiles on the walls for warmth and decoration. Light and ventilation came through lattice windows that literary records suggest were sometimes covered with silk. A number of pottery tomb models of houses show the lattice extending down to the

floor beside the main door so that the inhabitants seated on mats on the floor would have light and air.⁸ Variations of the Han dynasty courtyard house are still found in parts of China today, and sitting on mats and using low tables remain the traditional way of living in Korea and Japan.

Even in ancient China people occasionally sat on elevated seats for ceremonial and practical reasons in a Buddhist context and at court. A fragment of a bronze vessel from the Eastern Zhou found at Liuhe in Jiangsu province shows a person seated on a high stool drinking from a horn-shaped cup (see fig. 7.1). Probably this is a ceremonial occasion. High tables too were not unknown. Another Eastern Zhou vessel fragment depicts a high oval table with upturned ends (see fig. 14.1), a predecessor of the everted flanges of later times. A pottery tomb model of a high table with a jar on top was found in a late Eastern Han tomb at Lingbao, Henan province.⁹ This miniature table is a forerunner of the high square hardwood tables popular for dining in later times. It was made at a time when high seats were sometimes used for everyday household tasks, such as weaving. Sichuan was famous for its brocades and silk, and some of the stone tomb reliefs show ladies seated on high seats weaving at a loom and operating the treadles with their feet.¹⁰

Deities, like high dignitaries, are often elevated to indicate their status. The cave paintings at Dunhuang, Gansu province, depict many Buddhist deities and monks raised up on thrones, chairs, and stools, which are the precursors of later furniture. The most extreme examples of elevation are the canopied beds in illustrations to the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* that, together with their accompanying curved-leg tables, are elevated beyond realistic possibilities (see fig. 10.4). Nonetheless their basic form is comparable to representations of canopied beds in a secular context. Various types of stools show seated deities with their legs pendant. In cave 275 a painting from the Northern Liang (421–439) shows a bodhisattva sitting, one leg pendant and the ankle of the other resting on his knee, on a cylin-

1.6

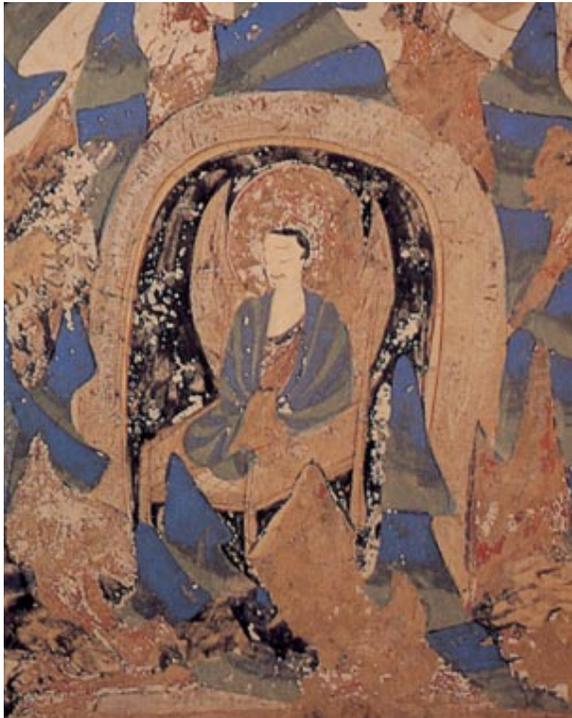


FIGURE 1.6 Detail of a wall painting in Dunhuang cave 285. Western Wei (535–557), dated to 538. From Dunhuang Wenwu Yanjiu, *Zhongguo shiku Dunhuang Moyao ku*, vol. 1, pl. 146.

FIGURE 1.7 Banquet. Mid Tang dynasty (781–848). Detail of a tomb wall painting in Nanliwang, Chang'an county, Shaanxi. Height 180 cm, width 235 cm. Shaanxi Provincial Museum. From Wang Renbo, *Sui Tang wenhua*, 200–201.

drical stool with rounded top, probably made of cane. Another painting in the cave depicts an hourglass-shaped stool. In cave 295 a pensive bodhisattva sits on a more fanciful stool with a lotus leaf-shaped seat, base, and matching footstool in a painting from the Sui dynasty (581–618) depicting Śākyamuni entering Parinirvana.¹¹ On a mid-sixth-century Buddhist stele in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, a monk holding an incense burner sits on a low round stool.¹² Folding stools, still common today, are thought to have been imported into China during the late second century. Perhaps the earliest depiction is on a Buddhist stele dated to 543 found near Luoyang that shows the Nepalese seer Asita seated and holding the infant Buddha (see fig. 7.3).

By the Tang dynasty (618–906), the habit of sitting on stools with legs pendant was prevalent among the ladies at court, marking the beginnings of an elevated mode of sitting in the daily life of the elite. For example, three-color glazed pottery tomb figurines show women seated on hourglass-shaped models (see fig. 7.5). In paintings of life at court that are believed to be close copies of Tang dynasty works, such as *Ladies Playing Double Sixes*, the oval wooden stools have four legs with cut-off cloud-head feet, cloud-head motifs repeated halfway up the legs, arch-shaped cusped aprons, and continuous beading along the inside edges. Sometimes cushions are tied onto the stools.¹³

Before the tenth century there are isolated examples of honorific chairs used not for easy access to tables but as a means of giving stature to important people. The earliest representations of such chairs in China are all in a Buddhist context. A depiction in Dunhuang cave 285, dated 538, shows a monk meditating in a cave in the mountains. He is seated in a kneeling posture on a highback armchair, which clearly has a woven seat (fig. 1.6). At this time there were also chairs with high backs and no arms. A rubbing from a Buddhist stele in the collection of the late Laurence Sickman shows a monk seated with legs pendant on such a chair with a back consisting of two high side posts joined by a single low horizontal bar.

In the Tang dynasty, chairs are also occasionally



1.7

connected with high officials as well as priests. A wall painting in the tomb of Gao Yuangui, a general who died in 756, shows him seated with legs pendant on a large armchair. A century later the Japanese monk Ennin visited China, and his diary describes important officials as well as priests sitting on chairs which he calls by the modern Chinese term *yi*. That Ennin bothers to mention sitting on chairs indicates that the practice was unusual.¹⁴

Mid and late Tang depictions of banquets show parties of men or women gathered around large rectangular tables. They are seated on benches or stools that are the same height or only slightly lower than the tables. For instance, in a wall painting in a tomb in Nanliwang, Chang'an county, Shaanxi, men are seated on long benches around a table laden with food (fig. 1.7). They sit in various postures—cross-legged,

with one knee raised, or with one leg hanging over the edge of the bench. None of the diners has his legs stretched out or under the table. This table has recessed legs, but in other representations the tables are constructed like boxes, making it impossible for people to sit with their legs under the table.¹⁵ Uncomfortable as these seating arrangements may be, they herald a transitional period between mat-level and true chair-level living in China, when it became the common practice to sit on chairs at high tables that were proportioned to provide sufficient leg room, rather than on mats or low platforms.

The radical change in how people lived becomes apparent in a painting generally considered to be a twelfth-century copy of *The Night Revels of Han Xizai* (fig. 1.8), a handscroll attributed to the tenth-century painter Gu Hongzhong. The painting and the

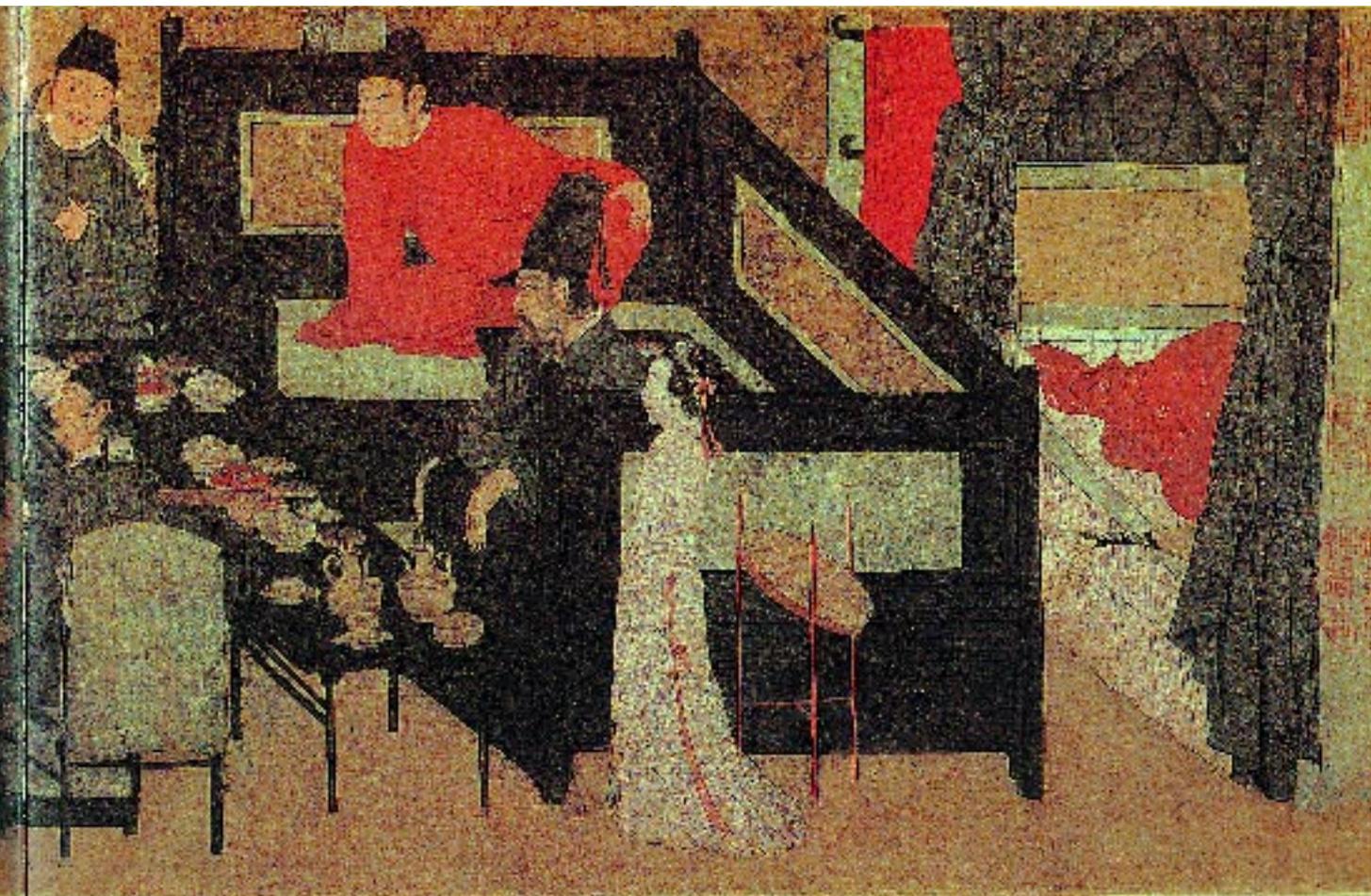


FIGURE 1.8 Attributed to Gu Hongzhong (tenth century). *The Night Revels of Han Xizai*. Early twelfth-century copy. Detail of a handscroll. Ink and color on silk. Height 29 cm, length 338.3 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing. Photo courtesy of Wango Weng.

story behind its creation were recorded in the early-twelfth-century catalog of the painting collection of the Song emperor Huizong (r. 1101–26).¹⁶ Han Xizai was an accomplished and learned gentleman who, to avoid being appointed to an official government post, deliberately led a dissipated existence. The emperor was suspicious, however, and wanted to discover if there was any truth in the stories about Han's lavish and licentious parties. So he sent Gu Hongzhong to attend one of the banquets and paint what he saw, and what Gu saw was most improper according to Confucian standards. The result was not only this delightful painting, but also one of the first extant depictions of a Chinese interior showing in detail the chair-level

mode of living. Like all copies, this painting inevitably updates the original work and thus gives an idea of the tenth- to twelfth-century Chinese interior.¹⁷

Furniture in this dynamic period has become a much more important component of the interior than it was in the Han dynasty. It is larger and includes new types and forms. Screens, now decorated with ink paintings of landscapes, continue to divide up large interior spaces, but, because people are now elevated by sitting on chairs, the screens are also much larger than in the Han dynasty. Han Xizai, with a beard and tall hat, is seated on a couch in front of tables laden with food and wine. The U-shaped wooden couch appears to be lacquered black and has high



1.8

sides and a back inset with ink paintings. Its unusual shape, which seems to have occurred in furniture only at this period, derives from pedestals in Buddhist cave temples.¹⁸

Han and his red-robed friend are seated with their legs up. On the couch between them, only partially visible, is a low table. The feast is laid out on this low table and three high rectangular tables in front of the couch. Wine pots and cups on stands are arranged on one table; the other tables are each set with eight dishes of persimmons and other foods arranged in two rows.

The high tables have round recessed legs, simple curvilinear apron-head spandrels, and side stretchers. This shape, with slight variations, has been found in

a full-size wooden tomb table, a miniature tomb model, and a tomb painting from the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and it has remained popular ever since.¹⁹ The tables are still an awkward height, almost level with the seats, so that it is impossible to fit one's legs under the table; but with them there is, at last, a clear intention of chair and table.

The black-lacquer chairs have bow-shaped top rails with upturned ends to which silk covers are tied for this special occasion. To keep their mortise-and-tenon joints from overlapping, the stretchers on the bases of the chairs are stepped, with the front one lowest, the side ones higher, and the back one highest. In this scroll apparently only the more important

guests are seated on chairs. The women never sit on chairs but on low stools or couches. Behind Han Xizai is a suggestive glimpse of a canopied bed with the patterned curtains tied back to reveal humped brocade covers, the neck of a musical instrument, and a landscape painting ornamenting the side panel. Beside the bed are the curved ends of a clothes rack.

The adoption of the chair-level mode of living was undoubtedly connected with the fundamental changes taking place in China during the Song dynasty (960–1279). Technological improvements in the cultivation of wheat and rice greatly increased food production. Improved transportation along waterways led to economic interdependence among localities. Successive invasions along China's northern frontier cut off the overland trade routes to the west, and China developed the alternative of the sea, becoming a leading maritime nation. Cities grew into great commercial centers, with a new society based more on commercial ties and less on the old paternalistic hierarchy.

Specific monetary changes also affected the empire. The earlier barter system gave way to a widespread monetary economy, and at the end of the eleventh century the first paper money was printed. With unprecedented wealth came a great demand for luxury goods among a large part of the population, not just the residents of the imperial palace.

There were also important changes and refinements in all the arts, including the art of furniture making. For the first time "greater woodwork" (*damuzuo*) was distinguished from "lesser woodwork" (*xiaomuzuo*). "Greater woodwork" referred to buildings, "lesser woodwork" to furniture and the latticework of windows, doors, and partitions. They became two distinct branches of carpentry.²⁰

At the same time, with the development of woodblock printing came the wide diffusion of all kinds of practical and literary knowledge and increased access to education. The first national newspapers were printed in the Song dynasty. On another level, storytelling became an important part of urban entertainment and led to the first popular secular literature. The examination system grew in importance, and scholar-

officials developed a culture and lifestyle that was emulated for centuries. It was an exciting period of economic and social revolution, great curiosity, the amassing of knowledge, and radical change and innovation. Among the primary innovations was the revolution in everyday life and the home that came with the popular advent of the chair and the mode of living it shaped.

During the Song dynasty even the common people came to use tables and chairs. The early-twelfth-century painting *Qingming Festival on the River*, by the court painter Zhang Zeduan depicts high tables and benches or chairs in all the restaurants, tea houses, and wine shops of the city. Traditionally this long handscroll was considered to be a depiction of the Northern Song capital, Bianjing (present-day Kaifeng, in Henan province), at the time of the Qingming Festival, when all the people go to the countryside to sweep the graves of their ancestors and admire the early spring foliage. However, recent scholarship suggests that the scroll portrays an idealized city that is a model of peace and order (*qingming*), and therefore the title should be translated *Peace Reigns over the River*.²¹ The scroll begins in the suburbs, and the viewer "travels" along the river past simple country inns and teahouses where people sit together on benches at large rectangular tables. Nearer the city the scene bustles with townspeople, travelers, peddlers, and workers crowding streets lined with shops and restaurants.

Just outside the gates stands a large second-class restaurant called a *jiaodian*, according to the sign at the elaborate entrance (a bamboo superstructure hung with bunting and banners). Inside the compound is a two-story building with paper-covered lattice windows open to reveal several rooms (fig. 1.9). In one, guests are seated on benches around a large rectangular table, just as in modest establishments (see fig. 1.2.7). A man is leaning on the balustrade of the balcony surrounding a second story sheltered by bamboo awnings. He gazes into the courtyard below. His friends are feasting around a table laden with dishes brought from the kitchen on a large round tray. The



1.9



1.10

people sit together around one high table instead of on mats at low individual tables, the previous norm.

From such images we can infer fascinating new manners in Chinese life. As a result of chair-level living, people began to help themselves with their own chopsticks to food from a common dish, as we still see in China today, and new forms of tableware developed. Moreover, in the Song dynasty the first truly national Chinese cuisine emerged, free from conventions of ritual or region and incorporating a great variety of ingredients from all over the country. The best restaurants became meeting places for the cultured elite. Food was served on beautiful porcelain or silver dishes, and rooms were decorated with flowers and miniature trees. Rare antiques and paintings by famous artists were displayed. In effect, the restaurants were the art galleries of the time.²²

Qingming Festival on the River shows some of the new forms of furniture for the elevated mode of living. Just inside the city gate an official appears to be collecting taxes from the merchants bringing in their goods (fig. 1.10).²³ He sits on an elevated version of the ancient folding stool to which a curved top rail and back have been added. The seats of Chinese chairs are almost always higher than those of Western chairs because the feet of a seated person are meant to rest on the front rung, as shown in the handscroll, or on a separate footstool to keep them off the cold brick floor.

FIGURES 1.9 and 1.10 Zhang Zeduan (early twelfth century). *Qingming Festival on the River*. Details of a handscroll. Ink and slight color on silk. Height 25.5 cm, length 525 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

In other sections of *Qingming Festival on the River* we see folding chairs with curved armrests and curved splats, a form that has been in use ever since. There were also rigid armchairs with curved rests. Fig. 1.11 shows an elegant seventeenth-century example fashioned from *huanghuali* wood. One of the most popular tropical hardwoods since the mid sixteenth century, its color ranges from golden yellow to reddish brown and when polished has a characteristic orange-gold sheen. The wood has a vigorous grain, sometimes forming eccentric abstractions that are especially prized. On this seventeenth-century chair, lighter-colored boxwood is subtly used to delineate both the raised dragons ornamenting the hand rests and a stylized *shou* longevity character on the splat. The chair has two side stretchers and a downward curving apron that continues in an unbroken line down to the footrest stretcher. The slight upward taper of all verticals lends a sense of lightness, and there is a perfect and subtle balance between the curved and straight



FIGURE 1.11 Roundback chair.
Ming or Qing dynasty,
seventeenth century. *Huanghuali*
wood with boxwood inlay.
Height 100 cm, width 59 cm,
depth 46 cm. © Christie's
Images, Ltd., 1999.

1.11

FIGURE 1.12 Attributed to Ma
Yuan (active before 1189—after
1225). *Composing Poetry on a
Spring Outing*. Southern Song
dynasty. Detail of a handscroll.
Ink and color on silk. Height
29.3 cm, length 302.3 cm.
The Nelson-Atkins Museum
of Art, Kansas City, Missouri.
(Purchase: Nelson Trust.)
© The Nelson Gallery
Foundation.



1.12



1.13

FIGURE 1.13 Reconstruction of a seventeenth-century Chinese scholar's studio. Courtesy of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

members. This chair curves to fit the human body. The same curved splat was later to bring greater comfort to Westerners when in the eighteenth century Queen Anne furniture incorporated this Chinese innovation.²⁴

With chair-level living, furniture became higher and larger. Early depictions, such as a wall painting in the Northern Qi (550–577) tomb of Cui Fen,²⁵ show writers seated on a mat at a small low table with curved legs, similar to the tables used in the Han dynasty kitchen in fig. 1.4. By contrast, in the painting *Composing Poetry on a Spring Outing*, attributed to Ma Yuan (active before 1189–after 1225), a late-twelfth-century poet is standing at a large high table brushing a poem for his friends (fig. 1.12). Such large tables need strengthening to carry the weight of the top boards. Here strength is achieved with a continuous

floor stretcher on which the legs (terminating in typical Song dynasty cloud-head feet) rest. The poet could sit at the table on the matching stool, but the floor stretcher would get in the way of his feet.

High stretchers were also used to strengthen tables (see fig. 1.8), but they likewise interfere with the legs of a seated person. The best solution is the waisted table, with an inset panel between the top and the apron. This design allows tables to be very large: one in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery is 178 centimeters wide yet relatively light and elegant in appearance. Fig. 1.13 shows this table as it might have been used in a seventeenth-century Chinese scholar's studio, laden with a partially unrolled handscroll, several books, a large brush holder, a fantastically shaped rock on a wooden stand, and seals. Large tables were the favored desks in China because they provided enough space

to brush large scrolls. Small objects were kept in chests, like the one on the table under the window, or in bookcases or cupboards. On the table beneath the hanging scroll is a Chinese zither that the scholar would have played while burning incense in the burner on the tall stand. The bookcases in this studio are especially beautiful and impressively large, about 190 centimeters high. The fronts and sides are fashioned from *huanghuali* wood; an interestingly patterned *jichi* wood burl is used for the backs, shelves, and tops. *Jichi*, literally “chicken-wing” wood, is a hard purplish brown wood with a streaked grain suggesting the feathers near the neck and wings of a chicken. Each bookshelf, with a low railing in front and a curvilinear inner frame above, would also be suitable for displaying a few choice antiques. In the middle are two drawers. Typically bookcases come in pairs, and all the pieces of furniture are arranged parallel to the walls and at right angles to one another.

These bookcases are but one of the new types of furniture that developed once the elevated mode of living became common. Several others may be seen in the Ming room in the Astor Court at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (fig. 1.14). In 1980 craftsmen came from China to build this room and the adjoining garden. Using traditional tools, they followed traditional Ming dynasty designs and techniques that can still be seen today in the gardens of Suzhou. They brought with them fifty pillars of *nan* wood (an evergreen of the cedar family prized for building and coffin making because of its resistance to insects, deterioration, and warping), specially logged for the project in Sichuan province, and terra-cotta tiles made in the Lumu imperial kiln, which was reopened for the occasion. For the doors they used ginkgo wood lattice consisting of many small pieces carefully mitered and joined with mortise-and-tenon joints like those used in furniture. The completed room displays the museum’s collection of hardwood furniture in a setting similar to those in which the pieces were originally used.

A pair of cupboards stand two and a half meters high, each consisting of a cabinet with a separate up-

per cupboard. Only one is visible in the photograph; the other is on the opposite side of the room. The design is simple and imposing, with the beauty of the wood enhanced by brass hardware that is both functional and decorative. Several kinds of high narrow tables would have been placed against the walls, their exact function depending on the room and the occasion. Here stands a long table with everted flanges and trestle legs in which are set openwork panels carved with coiling dragons. Next to the table is a three-drawer coffer with removable drawer runners to provide access to an additional storage area beneath. On the wall is a large hanging scroll, a format influenced by Buddhist banners and developed along with the chair-level mode so that paintings could ornament the walls for a special occasion and be viewed by several people at once. The older handscroll format (on the table in fig. 1.13) could be viewed only in small sections by one or two at a time.

Elevated furniture also demanded bigger houses, and consequently the architecture is loftier, with ceilings and windows higher than in mat-level times (compare with fig. 1.5). On the doors of the Astor Court the lattice does not extend all the way to the ground and would have been covered with oiled paper instead of the silk of earlier times.²⁶ Lattice doors, wooden room dividers, and openwork partitioning panels first began to be used in the late Tang dynasty.²⁷ With chair-level living, screens were inadequate as space dividers, and thereafter walls divided living spaces into rooms, their functions distinguished by their furnishings, as *Qingming Festival on the River* testifies. In effect, rooms came into being.

Another consequence of chair-level living was the new habit of keeping outdoor shoes on after entering a house. (When people sat on mats on the floor, they removed their shoes indoors.) The dirt that shoes tracked in inspired further changes: brick floors needed to be cleaned easily, and so new techniques were developed to make them smoother, stronger, and more level.²⁸ During the Han dynasty, platforms and mats for guests were arranged hierarchically, with the most important seat at one end, preferably facing



1.14

FIGURE 1.14 The Ming room, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of the Vincent Astor Foundation, 1980. Photo © 1982 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

south toward the sun, and lesser seats were in parallel rows in front (see fig. 1.1). By the Song dynasty chairs and stools had replaced mats, with stools placed farthest from the host for the less important guests. In place of the mat-level platform was a new chair-level type of furniture, the couchbed (*ta* or *luohan chuang*), which has a railing on three sides and, like the platform, is used for both sitting and sleeping.

The couchbed and other Ming dynasty furniture in the Astor Court are all made of hardwoods: the stools from *jichi* wood, the armchairs from *zitan* wood (the heaviest, densest, and most prized of Chinese cabinet woods), and the other pieces from *huanghuali* wood. Hardwoods were not widely used before the mid sixteenth century.²⁹ The furniture in *The Night Revels of Han Xizai* (see fig. 1.8) is black lacquer, and lacquer furniture continued to be popular, often used together with plain wood pieces in the same room.

The couchbed in the Astor Court has a small low table in the middle for holding books or tea utensils. That table is a smaller version of those used on *kangs* in north China. The *kang* is a high, hollow platform built against the wall of a room and heated—often by a kitchen stove in an adjoining chamber. In the late-Ming woodblock illustrations to the novel *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Jin ping mei*, chaps. 3, 4, 80, 81) and a painting by Shen Zhou (see fig. 11.5), the *kang* is shown against a side wall. In the Qing dynasty, *kangs* were commonly placed under the south windows.

They were usually made of brick or unbaked clay with a brick top. But in palaces such as the Forbidden City in Beijing, they were often made of wood, and the entire brick floor of the room was heated from underneath. In many places today *kangs* are still used for sleeping and daytime sitting. They are covered by a bamboo mat on which rugs and cushions may be placed, and they have their own low mat-level furniture consisting of small tables, cupboards, and shelves. People sit on *kangs* with their legs up (as in mat-level living) or pendant resting on a low stool (chair-level). Curiously, the *kang*, at the chair-level elevation, gave new life to the older mat-level practices. Only in China did the elevated form of living come together with the mat-level form—a poignant example of how in China even within revolution the continuity of tradition is strong.

As we have seen, the adoption of the chair-level mode of living marked a crucial point in Chinese history, with far-reaching causes and consequences. When people rose from the floor and began to sit in chairs around high tables, they introduced dramatic changes in the social customs of eating, working, and leisure. They sat in a room and a house that were likewise radically reshaped to accommodate the simple phenomenon of sitting high on a chair next to a table. Such elevation profoundly altered the lives of Chinese people, their surroundings, and, in both the physical and aesthetic sense, their vision of the world.