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The Symposium in Memory of the Ninetieth Anniversary of Yang Yao, 1902-78

Curtis Evarts

One year ago, in November 1991, the first International Symposium on Chinese Ming Domestic Furniture was held in Beijing, commemorating the work of Gustav Ecke. A second symposium was held in Suzhou this year, 15-17 October, honoring the work of Yang Yao, who had worked closely with Ecke to produce *Chinese Domestic Furniture* and is today recognized as the first Chinese scholar in the field of classical Chinese hardwood furniture. It was also appropriate that the organizers chose to meet in the city of Suzhou, which is considered to have been the center of production of classical Chinese furni-

ture throughout the Ming and early Qing dynasties.

Chen Zengbi, Chairman of the Council on Chinese Ming Domestic Furniture, which organized the event, officially opened the symposium, after which Zhou Zhihua, Vice-Secretary General of Suzhou, introduced the city to the more than seventy participants (fig. 1), outlining its rich history and describing the unique physical characteristics—lakes, canals, bridges, and renowned gardens—all of which contributed to the intellectual climate that produced some of China's most well-known scholars and artists. One purpose of the symposium was to stimulate



the modern furniture-making industry in China by helping to revitalize the great tradition of Chinese craftsmanship that flowered in Ming-style furniture. Therefore Zhou also touched upon the surging economy of Suzhou, where, in the year that has passed since Deng Xiaoping made his southern tour to reform trade and investment policies, foreign investment has increased sixfold.

Yang Yao's life and accomplishments were recounted in tributes read by two of his close friends, Chen Zengbi and Jin Oubo (Chairman of the Office for International Architecture), and by his eldest son, Yang Liqian. All agreed that Yang Yao rose from rather humble beginnings through diligence and hard work. He had already become a skilled draftsman by 1928, when he was introduced to Gustav Ecke, who happened to be in need of an assistant to make measured drawings for research he was doing on ancient stone and brick pagodas. (Yang Liqian later revealed that he possesses a drawing on silk, executed by his father and Ecke, of a temple that was transformed into a hospital during the war with the Japanese.) Yang Yao produced excellent work and proved to be a dedicated and devoted student, whom Ecke undertook to train in the Western analytical style. Together they studied the Ming and early Qing hardwood furniture that Western expatriates and diplomats living in Beijing during the 1930s were eagerly collecting. They took photographs, questioned craftsmen and restorers, and disassembled and reassembled many pieces to study and measure the construction and joinery. This research was documented in the many superb technical drawings that Yang Yao executed between 1934 and 1943 to illustrate Ecke's *Chinese Domestic Furniture*. During and after his collaboration with Ecke, Yang Yao held various architectural positions, including an assistant professorship of architecture and engineering at Beijing University, where, during the commemoration of its fiftieth anniversary in 1948, he delivered a paper entitled "The Popular Art of Chinese Furniture." In 1949, in recognition of his achievements, he was received by Premier Zhou Enlai and Liu Shaoji.

Yang Yao acquired many pieces of hardwood furniture with the financial aid of friends, having at one time as many as one hundred pieces. In 1952, however, when he was sent to northwest China to direct the work of a large construction project at Lanzhou in Gansu province, he had to leave his col-

lection with his younger sister, who was forced to sell most of it during the ensuing difficult times. (Later conversations revealed that a number of pieces now in Wang Shixiang's collection were acquired from Yang Yao's sister, and several others are in the collections of Jin Oubo and Chen Zengbi.) For Yang Yao, however, a greater regret was that the only books on Chinese furniture were written by foreigners in foreign tongues. He had published several papers on Chinese furniture after he returned from Gansu province in 1962, but because he was not born into a wealthy family, and did not receive the traditional scholar's education, he was subject to the idiosyncrasies of a culture that has been dominated for centuries by class society. Many of his peers failed to recognize him as a true scholar and shunned his work. These pressures, combined with unjustifiable persecution during the Cultural Revolution, weighed heavily upon him both mentally and physically, and in 1978 he passed away. Even on his deathbed, he continued to discuss furniture joinery with Chen Zengbi, and it was this friend who, in 1985, published a volume of Yang Yao's writings entitled *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu* (The Study of Ming-style Furniture).*

The papers that were presented throughout the day and the next morning included "Ming Furniture: An Expression of Chinese Culture," by Guo Yuanping; "The Artistry of Joinery: A Manifold Expression," by Curtis Evarts (to be published in *Orientations*, January 1993); "Identifying a Regional Style of Chinese Furniture," by John Ang; "Some Examples of the Appreciation of Ming Furniture," by Pu Anguo; "A Preliminary Inquiry into Korean Furniture," by Li Chunyu; "A Unique Folding Stool for Mounting Horses," by Chen Zengbi; "Cultural Characteristics of Han Furniture," by Zhao Zifu; "A Ming Meditating Chair Seen in Bauhaus Light," by Sarah Handler (to be published in *Orientations*, January 1993), and "A Superficial View of Chinese Furniture," by Sun Weishi. Two of the papers, those by Chen Zengbi and John Ang, are published in this issue.

*The first essay in this volume was published in the revised edition of the Spring 1991 issue of the Journal of the Classical Chinese Furniture Society. Other essays will be published in future issues.

Fig. 1, facing page. Participants in the Academic Symposium on Classical Chinese Furniture, in Memory of the Ninetieth Anniversary of the Birth of Professor Yang Yao, Suzhou, 15-17 October 1992.

In the afternoon of the second day of the symposium, a trip was organized to visit the local *hongmu* furniture factory, the carved lacquerware factory, the Suzhou Municipal Museum, and the Suzhou Folk Art Museum. At the Suzhou Municipal Museum, symposium participants were allowed to view a group of pieces of miniature wooden furniture excavated from the A.D. 1613 tomb of the scholar-official, Wang Xijue, at Tiger Hill, Suzhou. The pieces were part of the group that was published in *Wenwu* (1975, number 3), including an alcove bed, a yokeback armchair, a recessed-leg table with double stretchers, a clothes rack, and a washbasin stand. All were carefully fashioned of wood and constructed with standard mortise-and-tenon joinery. The lattice railings of the alcove bed were decorated with the *wanzi* motif, and it was interesting to note the protruding tenons that extended from the panels around the top of the canopy, a feature only seen on a few extant examples of full-size furniture. Curiously, the bed was somewhat smaller than the rest of the furniture. The chair and table had thick proportions and strongly splayed members. The crest rails of both the clothes rack and the washbasin stand were decorated with *lingzhi* fungus and cloud-head carvings. Two other excavated pieces were brought out as well, including a Five Dynasties lacquered sutra box decorated with mother-of-pearl and precious stones, and a Song dynasty sutra box fashioned from *nanmu*. It was a pity that we were only allowed a few minutes to

examine these pieces, as they are an invaluable part of the very small body of datable reference material available for the study of Chinese furniture.

The Suzhou Folk Art Museum was formerly the residence of the Bei family, where the renowned architect I. M. (B)Pei was raised. Many of the lattice-work spandrels decorating the courtyard walkways were carved with the *beiyi* motif, a leaf used in ancient times upon which scriptures were written, and a rebus for the Bei family name. Its main hall was furnished with a seventeenth-century *huanghuali* canopy bed, to which a front alcove section was probably added within the last century. Most of the other furniture was eighteenth and nineteenth century, with perhaps the exception of a *jumu* or possibly *zhajing* recessed-leg table with everted flanges and carved openwork panels between the legs. The day came to an end after the group had been taken to the beautifully night-lit Wangshiyuan (Garden of the Master of the Fishing Nets), where performances of traditional Chinese dance and music were held in each of the seven pavilions, which have recently been refurnished with reproduction Ming-style furniture.

The following day a boat trip was arranged down the Grand Canal and then east to the small village of Zhou Zhuang. The travel time was about two hours, and therefore we were exposed to much of the waterborne culture that has existed along these well-traveled waterways for centuries. There were boats and barges of varying sizes, and many seemed



to be homes for couples with their one child, and sometimes a dog or cat. The kitchen cabin was often furnished with a square table, stools, and a cabinet, and the captain was seated on a chair. Coal braziers were still in use for cooking and heating. Benches are commonplace on boats—useful both as seats and as working surfaces for major and minor repairs. Life along the canal teems with activity: fishing, harvesting aquatic crops, and irrigating fields with buckets carried from the canal on strong shoulders. A few modern, yet rather archaic-looking, pumps fitted to boats lift water from the canal to irrigate the larger rice and mulberry fields that seem to be major crops along the way. Everything imaginable is transported on this inland waterway—logs travel toward the mill, finished furniture to the marketplace, scrap metal to the melting pot, crushed road rock to construction sites, coal to the kilns where bricks and tile are manufactured—and then these finished products are shipped out to their next destination (fig. 2). It would seem that little has changed here over the centuries except for the ubiquitous rat-a-tat-tat of China's workhorse, the basic diesel engine.

Zhou Zhuang is a unique village, isolated by four surrounding lakes and divided by narrow canals, where much early architecture from the Ming and Qing dynasties has been preserved. Several of its ten stone bridges date from the Yuan and Ming dynasties, including the Key Bridge, built during the Wanli reign. The Zhang family hall (Zhangting) was

also built during the Wanli period. Some of the wooden lattice railings patterned with *wanzi* motifs surrounding its small courtyard were still intact and emanated the strength and boldness typical of the late Ming period. In damaged areas where the joinery was exposed, quality craftsmanship could be seen in the use of miters with blind double tenons to secure the lattice design elements (fig. 3).

The return trip by boat was just as spectacular, offering unforgettable impressions as the sun set over distant landscape scenes. After arriving back to Suzhou, all the participants took part in a banquet at a local restaurant specializing in Suzhou cuisine, and closing speeches were given by the organizers and sponsors. Although there were fewer papers presented than in the previous symposium, the quality of the papers and of the general discussion had improved greatly, with considerably less emphasis on the reproduction furniture industry. The Council on Chinese Ming Domestic Furniture will take a well-deserved rest next year; a plan for a major symposium in 1994, however, with even greater foreign participation, is already in its beginning stages.

Fig. 2, facing page, left. A barge transporting goods on the Grand Canal.

Fig. 3, facing page, right. Wooden lattice railings patterned with *wanzi* motifs in the courtyard of the Zhang family hall in the village of Zhou Zhuang, built during the Wanli period of the Ming dynasty. The joinery is exposed in this damaged section, revealing the miters with blind double tenons used to secure the lattice elements.

Calendar of Events: 1992

1 December

Christie's

219 East 67th Street, New York

1 December

Sotheby's

1334 York Avenue, New York

3 December

Christie's

502 Park Avenue, New York

12 December

Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture

Renaissance, California

Auction: English and Continental Furniture and Oriental Furniture and Works of Art

For information call 212-371-5438.

Auction: Chinese Works of Art

For information call 212-606-7245.

Auction: Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art

For information call 212-371-5438.

Lecture: A Ming Meditating Chair Seen in Bauhaus Light

Lecture and slide presentation by Dr. Sarah Handler

Sponsored by the Classical Chinese Furniture Society

For information call 916-692-3142.