Traditional Jumu Furniture and the Museum of Classical Jumu Furniture

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Much of China's superb artistry originated from the coastal regions south of the Yangzi, where a propensity for refinement and creativity is found within the Jiangnan sub-cultures. Prehistoric evidence is found amongst the relics from the local neolithic cultures, such as the Liangzhu jades, whose exquisite carving technique is so clearly distinguished from other contemporary cultures in northern and central China. Thousands of years later, unrivalled artistic techniques from Suzhou – at the heart of the Jiangnan region – were emulated elsewhere in China through much of the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties. These indigenous sensitivities permeated the realm of furniture-making: in no other region was there such marked correlation between provincial works using local timbers and 'classical-style' furniture produced from precious imported hardwoods.

Common furniture-making woods that are indigenous to the Jiangnan region include cypress, *nanmu*, *jumu* and oak.

(Fig. 1) *Jumu* tree at Yushan island, Lake Tai, Jiangsu province, 2002 (Photography by the author)

Of these, *jumu* has long been considered a premium furniture-making timber due to its strength, hardness, pleasing grain patterns and workability. Within the region, fine *jumu* furniture stands outside the dualistic categories of 'hardwood' or 'softwood' furniture, and is not debased by derogatory descriptions like 'firewood', 'country-style' or 'whitewood', that are commonly associated with furniture not made of tropical hardwoods. Long admired by collectors, such furniture forms the basis of the Museum of Classical Jumu Furniture, a small private museum, newly opened in Shanghai. This article discusses the *jumu* furniture-making tradition, the museum and a small selection of its many treasures.

Jumu (*Zelkova Schneideriana*) is also known by its common names Zelkova in English and *nanyu mu* (Southern Elm) in Chinese, the latter coined by northerners to differentiate it from the true elm species (*yumu*) that is common throughout northern China and somewhat similar in appearance. Four main varieties of *jumu* are found in Asia: 'Taiwan *jumu*'; 'small-leaf (*xiaoye*) *jumu*', a smaller arbor from the central provinces of Shaanxi, Hubei and Sichuan; 'bright-leaf (*guangye*) *jumu*' which is found in Korea and Japan where it is commonly known as *keyaki*; and 'large leaf (*daye*) *jumu*' which is largely concentrated in the Jiangnan provinces of Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Anhui. Although there are few surviving examples today, the old Jiangnan trees could grow over 30 metres tall and 1.5 metres wide. The tone of the heartwood varies from yellow to red and coffee-brown. Thus Jiangsu craftsmen traditionally divide *jumu* into three types: *huangju* (yellow *ju*), *hongju* (red *ju*) and *xueju* (blood *ju*). *Xueju* has the highest density and deepest tone. Because of its feather-like grain pattern, it can be mistaken for *jichimu* (lit. 'chicken-wing wood').

Jumu is porous and has a refined ring structure which in tangentially cut timber reveals a pattern that resembles a layered mountain landscape traditionally referred to as *baota wen* (lit. 'pagoda pattern'). Such timbers were often selected for door panels of cabinets or the back splats of a chair (see Figs 4 and 8). The timber was appreciated for its 'natural imagery'. In an old *jumu* cabinet I examined recently, the *baota wen* on its doors had been enhanced like a landscape painting with small ink-brushed figures, pine trees, pagodas, and so on. (The cabinet is in a private collection in Shanghai. I attempted to photograph a detail of the imagery but unfortunately, the brushwork was too faded to come out clearly.)

Article reprinted from *Orientations*, June 2006.

(Fig. 2) Display at the Museum of Classical Jumu Furniture in Shanghai showing (from right): a *luohan chuang* (day bed), a lampstand, a folding chair, a bookcase and a tapered cabinet

It was common for families in the greater Suzhou region to cultivate *jumu* and other trees for the benefit of future generations. Local residents recall that *jumu* chests, cabinets, beds, chairs, clothes racks, stools, dressing tables, etcetera, were still common dowry gifts through to the 1950s. However, with the coming of the Cultural Revolution during the 1960s, lavish marriage traditions were strictly forbidden. The long established custom of cultivating *jumu* trees for dowries came to an end and the supply was soon exhausted.

In 2002, during a visit to the Dongshan region west of Suzhou, I enquired about the whereabouts of old *jumu* trees, and was shown one surviving arbor on Yushan island in Lake Tai (Taihu), which is accessible only by a small skiff (Fig. 1). The tree was planted in front of the Xi family ancestral hall, of which little survives other than remnants of the stone commemoration tablets. Judging from the inscription on a nearby tablet dated to 1781, the tree is probably more than 200 years old.

Jumu furniture is found throughout Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces, as well as the Huizhou region of Anhui. However, large concentrations of high-quality 'Ming-style' furniture made from *jumu* were discovered in the small towns and villages around the Dongshan region – the source for many of the works in the Museum of Classical Jumu Furniture. Situated along the eastern shores of Lake Tai, Dongshan was also the locus of the Xiangshan *bang*, a lineage-fraternity of builders and artisans long recognized as preserving highly sophisticated craftsmanship traditions. This was the heritage of Kuai Xiang (?1398-1481), the architect-builder of the Ming dynasty imperial palace in Beijing. With roots dating to the Warring States period (475-221 BCE), the Xiangshan lineage survived well into the 20th century. According to a local publication, *Xiangshan xiao zhi* (*Little Gazetteer of Xiangshan*), dated 1917, more than half of the region's population were carpenters and masons.

The fertile land and hills along the eastern shores of Lake Tai have long produced bountiful fruits, berries, nuts and tea; and its waters are ever abundant with fish and shellfish. The rich literati culture of Dongshan yielded some 44 *jinshi* officials during the Ming and Qing periods. Such enticements as well as the renowned pastoral scenery drew the Kangxi emperor (r. 1662-1722) to this region during his third Southern Inspection Tour. Only recently touched by modernization, numerous buildings from the mid- and late Qing periods have survived here, and the handful of Ming dynasty and earlier structures also reveals the line of inherited tradition.

Classically styled furniture complemented the traditional architecture of the region. By local accounts, many households were still using traditional furniture up until the Cultural Revolution. After visiting Dongshan in 1980, Wang Shixiang published several examples of classically styled *jumu* furniture that he had discovered there, noting the style

and workmanship to be identical to *huanghuali* examples from the Jiangnan region he was more familiar with in Beijing (see Wang, 1990, A44, A49, A57, B102, C7, D25, 1.10a, b, c, 1.11). Although Wang made the assumption that the *jumu* pieces were later than their *huanghuali* counterparts, he also recognized the possibility of their coming from the same workshops.

Yunjian jumu chao (*Record of Things Seen in Yunjian*), Fan Lian's oft-quoted account of the emerging fashion in hardwood furniture in nearby Songjiang during the latter half of the 16th century, also indicated that *jumu* had been a customary material for furniture-making at that time. In the absence of earlier evidence, it is probable that *jumu* had been a choice material since at least the Song dynasty (960-1279). However, *jumu* furniture that has survived over three centuries is rare because of its relatively low resistance to boring insects and moisture-induced decay. In the course of my ongoing research on datable Chinese furniture, I discovered that reliably dated 18th century examples made from *jumu* frequently suffer considerable loss of height due to deterioration at the feet. Moreover, datable 19th century furniture also commonly exhibits classical styles; due to the continuous reproduction of traditional patterns, many surviving examples of *jumu* furniture may well have been made during the late Qing and Republican (1911-49) periods.

In recent decades, dealers in the Suzhou area (and descendants of Xiangshan artisans) are known to have made fine copies patterned from old *jumu* furniture that was dilapidated beyond restorability. A yokeback armchair in the Museum of Classical Jumu Furniture intentionally represents such a work; even though it was produced less than a decade ago, it has the appearance of an earlier piece. (Due to the scarcity of old *jumu* timbers, copies are now more commonly reproduced in other woods.) While rare examples from the late Ming and early Qing periods may indeed exist, arbitrary dating based upon style and form alone has become meaningless; rather, realistic dating must be drawn in conjunction with subtler age-defining characteristics such as the details of workmanship and depth of patination, or from actual datable reference.

Dating aside, collectors of Chinese furniture have increasingly come to value classically styled *jumu* pieces. Notwithstanding the prestige and reputation of some woods over others, the artistic elegance and exquisite forms achieved by the Xiangshan School are indeed worthy of connoisseurship. Furthermore, such artistry also reflects aesthetics that emanated from the region's literati culture, for whom furnishings, lifestyle and art were all intricately interwoven. Numerous ideas about furniture-making that are expressed in varying detail amongst the writings of the late Ming-early Qing Jiangnan literati are borne out by furniture that has survived from the period.

James Zhou, the founder of the Museum of Classical Jumu Furniture, was born in Shanghai. During the early 1990s, he studied in New York, where – with his background and family ties – he was no stranger to the local auctions of

(Fig. 3) Display at the Museum of Classical Jumu Furniture in Shanghai showing (from right): a throne chair, a chest resting on a cabinet, a small table with a pair of stools and a large square-corner cabinet

Chinese art. As an impoverished foreign student, however, he could only marvel at the *huanghuali* furniture offered by Sotheby's and Christie's. Nonetheless, he also recognized the similarity between the style and workmanship of these pieces and the traditional *jumu* furniture from the Suzhou region that he was familiar with from his childhood. After returning to Shanghai and establishing himself in business, Zhou began collecting antique *jumu* furniture. The cultivation of this passion eventually led to the formation of a focused collection that would represent the refined aesthetics of the Jiangnan literati culture. The collection's concentration on region-specific material also provides unique insight into

(Fig. 4) One of a pair of tapered cabinets
Mid-Qing period, 18th/19th century
Jumu
Cabinet: height 209 cm, width 107 cm,
depth 61.5 cm; stand: height 16.5 cm
Museum of Classical Jumu Furniture, Shanghai

furniture culture as a whole in the Jiangnan region – an aspect reflected in the museum's Chinese name, Jiangnan Mingshi Wenren Bowuguan ('museum of Jiangnan Ming-literati style furniture').

The collection is now housed in a small private museum located along the northern stretch of the Bund, on 713/5f Dong Daming Road, in an old warehouse built in 1929. Because of its unique cantilevered construction techniques, the building has been preserved by the Shanghai Municipal Government as a historical site. The six-storied space is also home to a number of contemporary art galleries.

With the design expertise of Kamwah Chan, the museum's 1,000-square-metre space was transformed into a gallery of modern-classical style that provides a stunning setting for more than 100 examples of Ming-style antique *jumu* furniture. Although some exhibits are grouped according to traditional function, the objects are generally displayed as individual works which stand on their own artistic merit (Figs 2 and 3). The collection reflects Zhou's high standards: objects had to be in original condition with a minimal amount of restoration and their original patination.

The museum's collection includes a number of tapered cabinets, the production of which was brought to perfection in the Jiangnan region and, most notably, among *jumu* furniture. The tapered cabinet was a popular form and many examples have survived. They are found in different sizes and with a variety of moulded frame detail. Those with 'melon-ridged' (*gualeng*) mouldings are typical of Dongshan work (see Wang, 1990, D25). Two examples from the museum are illustrated here: a large pair of majestic, yet refined, stature (Fig. 4), and a small cabinet with table stand of elegant scholar's taste (Fig. 5, left).

The design of the large cabinets in Figure 4 is comparable with three identical pairs of *huanghuali* cabinets in The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art (see Wang, 1990, D23), the Seattle Art Museum, and the Hung Collection (see Ellsworth, pl. 74). Sharing distinctive mouldings and aprons, it is likely that all were products of a single workshop in the Suzhou region. The frame members are softly shaped with lobed profiles enfolded by 'incense stick' beading. The aprons are of cusped, inverted *ruyi* style. Like the *huanghuali* cabinets, the beautifully figured panels of the *jumu* pair have been carefully matched, reflecting selectivity in the choice of material. The *jumu* cabinets, however, are considerably larger and more imposing.

The original dark bronze mounts of the *jumu* cabinets in Figures 4 and 5 recall Wen Zhenheng's preference for 'purple brass' (*zitong*) cabinet hardware. Wen (1585-1645), a native of the Suzhou region and a prominent member of the literati elite, shared numerous ideas in *Zhangwuzhi* (*Treatise on Superfluous Things*) on the appropriateness of furniture design and arrangement. Regarding cabinet hardware, he advised: 'Avoid using white brass (*baitong*) – use purple brass according to the old style.' (Wen, p. 238)

Wen also commented on the use of *chudian* – stands that

(Fig. 5) Display at the Museum of Classical Jumu Furniture showing a small cabinet with table stand on the left
Early Qing period, 17th/18th century
Jumu
Cabinet: height 101 cm, width 74 cm, depth 46 cm; stand: height 76 cm
Museum of Classical Jumu Furniture, Shanghai

were traditionally used in the Jiangnan region to distance cabinets from damage-inducing ground moisture – and his stylistic preference for those without drawers or shelves. Many cabinets from the humid southern coastal regions are found with this accessory stand in various configurations. An elegant low cabinet which stands tall upon a table-height stand is a rare example of *chudian* design (Fig. 5). The large pair of cabinets in Figure 4 presently rest on low stands of more recent date which were probably made to replace deteriorated older stands some 50-100 years ago. Thus, the replaceable *chudian* also preserved the cabinet for use by later generations.

Jumu cabinets like the ones illustrated in Figures 4 and 5, as well as many of the pieces in the museum collection, retain a thin, clear lacquer coating, which is typical of *jumu* as well as other fine hardwood furniture in the Jiangnan region. The lacquer is traditionally referred to as *qingshui* (lit. 'clear water') by locals of the Suzhou region; a variant term, *shuimo* (lit. 'water polish'), also appears in the 1591 *Zun sheng ba jian* (*Eight Discourses on the Art of Living*), jottings on furniture by Gao Lian, a writer from Hangzhou during the late Ming period. During the early 17th century, Yang Ming, the editor of *Xiushi lu* (*Notes on Lacquer Decoration*), a treatise of the Longqing period (1567-72), who lived in nearby Jiaxing, explained that '*shui*' (water) was a colloquial term for a refined and thin-bodied lacquer (Wang, 1998, p. 46). This thin, watery lacquer, which was produced from the thick, milky raw lacquer through several stages of refining, has served as a natural transparent finish for fine furniture as well as scholar's objects for centuries. The interiors of the *jumu* cabinets are protected with thick black lacquer, which served to establish an equilibrium between the inner and outer surfaces, thereby preventing unequal moisture exchange and ensuing warping problems.

The *qin* (zither) table is associated with the literati culture, and is one of the more commonly discussed pieces of furniture amongst literati writings. Playing the *qin* is one of the four accomplishments required of a cultivated literatus along with painting, calligraphy and *weiqi*. The example in Figure 6 is a masterly artifice of a delicate work in bamboo. The choice of *xueju* wood for this masterpiece suggests that the material was held in high esteem. A similarly styled stool made of boxwood, which was exhibited in the 1999 'Splendor of Style' exhibition in Taipei, most likely also originated from the Suzhou area (National Museum of History, p. 73).

The pioneering Western collector George Kates (1895-1990) wrote that the Chinese were masters of rectilinear space division. Such mastery is revealed in the clothes rack,

(Fig. 6) Bamboo-style *qin* table
Mid-Qing period, 18th/19th century
Jumu
Height 81.5 cm,
length 95 cm,
width 40.5 cm
Museum of Classical
Jumu Furniture, Shanghai

yet another stunning work that displays the art of fine furniture-making (Fig. 7). The overall simplicity of design and the balance between linear and curvilinear elements are visually satisfying. Similarity of style is evidenced by the *huanghuali* clothes rack in the Vok Collection, which also originated from the Dongshan area (Vok, pl. 37).

Unlike in northern China, the yokeback form seemed to have dwindled in popularity in the mid- and late Qing periods. As a result, surviving examples from the Jiangnan area are relatively rare. The small yokeback armchair in the museum's collection may be of relatively early date – 17th century – as late Ming and early Qing features are found in the delicate rounded detail that is evident throughout the entire piece, including the moulded profiles, base stretchers and aprons (Fig. 8).

The long altar table is another spectacular work where the skill of material selection, design, carpentry and carving are brought together to produce a singular work of furniture art (Fig. 9). The tabletop is made from a massive plank some 3.3 metres long and 7.5 centimetres thick – material harvested from a huge arbor, the likes of which disappeared long ago. The weight of the tabletop is alleviated with scroll-shaped everted ends of low profile. Here again is the echo of Wen Zhenheng, whose arbitration of high taste extended to the details of such tables: 'The everted flanges must not be too sharp, but smooth and rounded, then it is according to

(Fig. 7) Clothes rack
Mid- to late Qing period, 18th/19th century
Jumu
Height 176 cm, length 140 cm, width 43.5 cm
Museum of Classical
Jumu Furniture, Shanghai

the antique pattern' (Wen, p. 231). However, the makers of this table clearly deferred to the popular trend of dragon-and-phoenix carving – a tasteless motif in Wen's measure for elegance during the late Ming period. Nonetheless, the carving is masterfully executed, and reflects the 18th century fashion for archaic motifs. The overall proportion and balance of this work is at least equal to any of the classically styled works in *huanghuali*.

In conclusion, the focus on *jumu* furniture provides a unique window through which to view the classical furniture tradition. It is a perspective centred on works in one material, which were produced in one region. *Jumu* furniture is a finely distilled blend of Xiangshan artistry and Jiangnan literati traditions. Consequently, the Museum of Classical Jumu Furniture offers a wonderful new opportunity to explore the world of Chinese furniture and reach new levels of understanding.

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Visitors to the Museum of Classical Jumu Furniture may call (86) 139-0178 5578 to confirm the opening hours.

(Fig. 8) Yokeback armchair
Late Ming-early Qing period, 17th century
Jumu
Height 107 cm, width 53.5 cm, depth 47 cm
Museum of Classical Jumu Furniture, Shanghai

Fig. 9) Detail of an altar table
Mid-Qing period, 18th century
Jumu
Height 87 cm, length 333 cm, width 54 cm
Museum of Classical Jumu Furniture, Shanghai

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