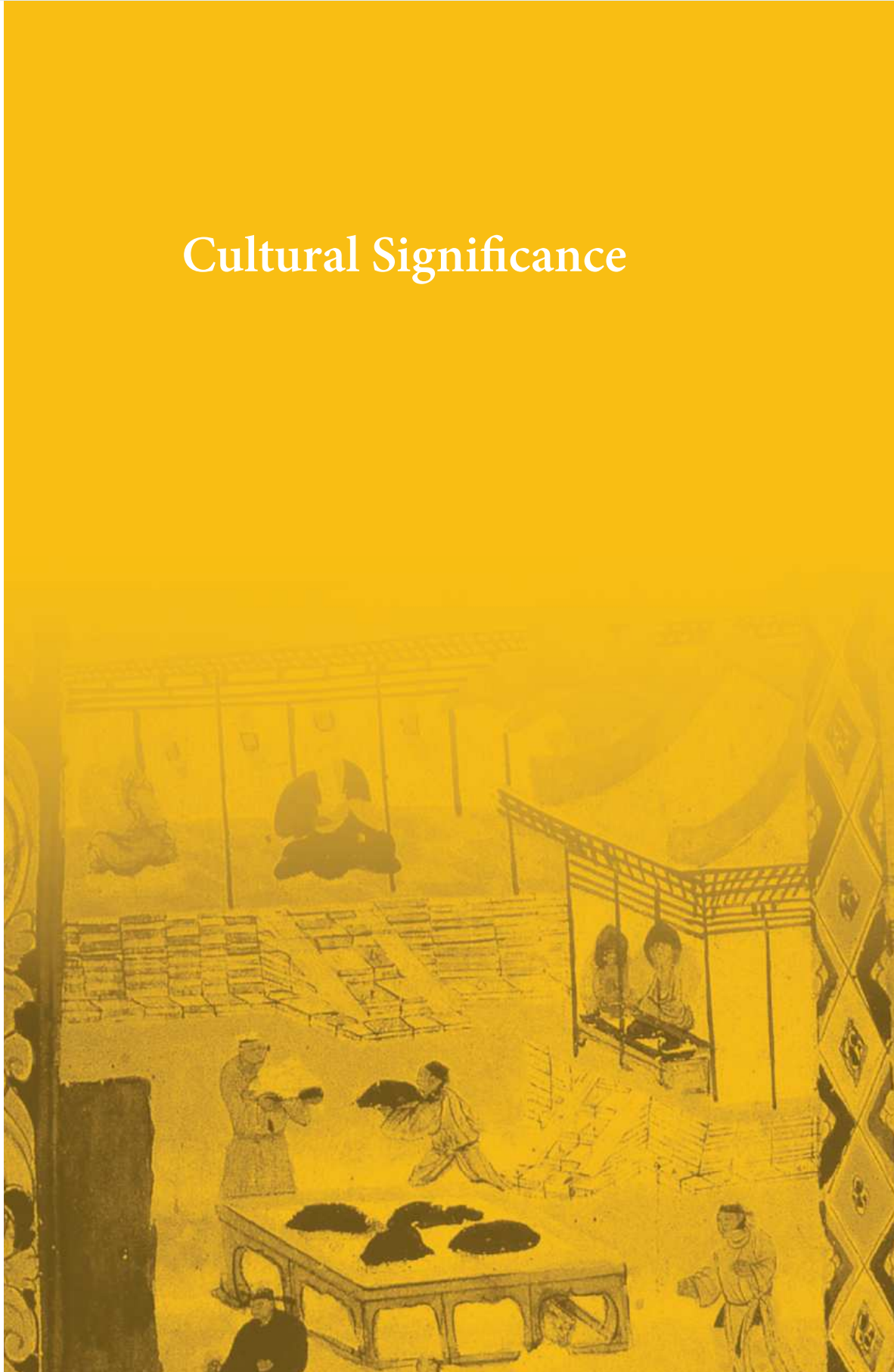


Cultural Significance



CHINESE FURNITURE

Regional Styles

China is a vast country, and living conditions and ways of life vary significantly from place to place. Different regions also have different approaches to the production and use of furniture. Important furniture-producing regions include Beijing, Guangzhou, Suzhou, Shanghai, Shanxi, Ningbo, Yangzhou, Huizhou, and Tianjin. The best furniture has traditionally come from the Suzhou, Guangzhou, Beijing, and Shanghai regions.

Suzhou-style Furniture

Suzhou-style is produced in the area around the city of Suzhou on the lower reaches of the Yangtze River.

During the Ming Dynasty, the economy in the region developed rapidly and businesses prospered. A large number of private gardens were built by rich men and officials who wanted high quality furniture to decorate their gardens, which in turn promoted the manufacture of furniture in the area and made Suzhou a well-known centre of furniture production. Furniture produced here accounted for a large proportion of Ming-style furniture. Furniture from Suzhou was also popular during the Qing Dynasty.



Square *huanghuali* armchair. Ming Dynasty.
This armchair mixes straight lines and curved shapes.



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Because timber is less abundant in Suzhou than in the regions around Beijing or Guangzhou, its furniture tends to make very careful use of wood. A decorative hardwood veneer was often used to cover parts that were made from other varieties of wood or pieced together from small pieces of timber. Suzhou-style furniture required skilful choices of materials, straight and smooth lines, and an elegant style. It set new standards in manufacturing.

Suzhou-style furniture is characterized by simplicity, with little complex decoration used. Engravings are lively but not overly elaborate, and pieces are often inlaid with materials such as ivory and stone. Abundance is a common theme of the decoration, with pine needles, bamboo, plums, birds, and flowers featuring heavily as well as various myths, legends, and traditional patterns. This style of furniture has maintained an elegant and recognisable style during its long history. Unique in form, decoration, and craftsmanship, it has had a significant impact on the design of modern furniture.

Guangzhou-style Furniture

If Suzhou is the cradle of Ming-style furniture, then Guangzhou is the cradle of Qing-style furniture.

Economic and cultural development during the Qing Dynasty allowed rulers to pursue new levels of sophistication and luxury. The simple Ming-style furniture no longer met their tastes, and luxurious new furniture from Guangzhou began to increase in popularity. Guangzhou-style replaced Suzhou-style as the most common style of furniture found in the palaces of the Qing Dynasty. Carpenters in Guangdong produced a number of significant examples that survive today. Around the middle of the Qing Dynasty, some manufacturers began to imitate Western furniture styles in response to an increase in demand. As a result, Guangzhou-style furniture is influenced by baroque and rococo styles and often imitates Western furniture in its shape, structure, and decoration. In the late period of the



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Republic of China, the war slowed the development of Guangzhou-style furniture, but since the founding of the People's Republic of China it has been revived gradually.

Because of its location in South China, Guangzhou became an important gateway for foreign trade and cultural exchange. It was the main port and channel for high-quality wood from Southeast-Asian countries during the Song and Ming Dynasties. A reliable supply of raw materials allowed Guangzhou-style furniture to use larger and thicker pieces of wood. Most examples of this type of furniture are made of a single type of wood, which is left unpainted. Pieces tend to be large and display great diversity.

Guangzhou-style furniture is delicately engraved, with engravings covering up to 80% of the total area of some pieces. Traditionally, costly materials such as marble, ivory, and amber were used and, at the time, the level of craftsmanship was unsurpassed. To this day, a piece of rosewood furniture beset with marble and mother-of-pearl inlay is most likely an example of Guangzhou-style furniture.



Zitan cabinet with shelves. Qing Dynasty.
 The enamel inlay decoration features cloud and dragon patterns.



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The metal fittings used in this region are equally fine. Some decorative patterns originated from popular western styles, and these have a very different feel to the traditional lotus pattern used in Suzhou-style furniture. This feature can be used to help identify Guangzhou-style pieces. Guangzhou-style furniture absorbed and adapted other western elements, and the style has high artistic and cultural value. Some experts maintain that Guangzhou-style furniture is not as aesthetically pleasing as Suzhou-style furniture, but from a historical point of view the region is extremely important.



Carved *Zitan* armchair. Qing Dynasty.
 This armchair incorporates various Western patterns, which is typical of Guangzhou-style furniture.

Beijing-style Furniture

Generally speaking, Beijing-style furniture refers to items made by the palace workshops in the capital. Typically, the materials used are rosewood, redwood, and some varieties of hardwood.

Beijing-style furniture has a long history. Workshops began to produce furniture for palaces during the Ming Dynasty, and the style was gradually introduced to the public. During the Qing Dynasty, workshops specialized in making various kinds of hardwood furniture, while elm began to be used during the Guangxu regime (1875–1908). The region inherited and built on the tradition of Ming-style furniture but gradually developed its own distinct style.

Beijing-style furniture was often made of rare timber, and most of the raw materials used to furnish the palaces of the Qing



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Dynasty were shipped from Guangzhou at great expense. During the Qing Dynasty, the emperors themselves took an interest in the manufacturing processes. Officials were even asked to save timber where possible. One typical feature of Beijing-style furniture is the size of the materials used; generally the materials used were smaller than in Guangzhou-style furniture and a little bigger than in Suzhou-style furniture.

Because of the large financial and material resources of the palace workshops, there were few restrictions on labor, money, or



Huanghuali antique-and-curio shelf. Qing Dynasty.
The fine decoration and traditional style are typical of Beijing-style furniture.



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materials. Beijing-style pieces are therefore well known for their high-quality materials, elegant form, and decorative traits.

The strict but elegant lines of Beijing-style furniture are reminiscent of both Guangzhou-style furniture and Suzhou-style furniture, although the latter tends to be more colorful. In terms of decoration, luxury, brightness, and artistry are the bywords. Many pieces from this region are decorated with gold, silver, jade, ivory, enamel, and other precious materials. Beijing-style furniture is noted for its richness and grandeur but function was sometimes sacrificed in pursuit of form.

Shanghai-style Furniture

Shanghai-style furniture was traditionally made of rosewood and other high-grade hardwoods from the late Qing Dynasty



Shanghai-style writing desk



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up until the founding of the People's Republic of China. As with the regions of Guangzhou and Ningbo, the influence of the West on design and manufacturing became evident from the middle of the Qing Dynasty. Shanghai-style furniture is similar in form and style to Ming-Dynasty furniture, but certain western and Guangzhou influences give it a unique style.



Shanghai-style chairs.

Many of the new categories and styles that emerged in Shanghai greatly influenced the development of modern furniture. Shanghai-style furniture is dignified and elegant, and often displays exquisite carving and craftsmanship. It drew on the strengths of other regions in China and the West to develop a school of its own which has played a leading role in the development of new technologies.

In short, Suzhou-style furniture was elegant, Guangzhou-style furniture was bold, Beijing-style furniture was grand, and Shanghai-style furniture was beautiful.

The Influence of Scholars on Ming-style Furniture

Furniture from the Ming Dynasty is an excellent example of Chinese traditional furniture. It is simple in form and compact, but conveys a sense of dignity and purity. When appreciating



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Small rectangular table made from *huanghuali* wood. Ming Dynasty.
This table includes a drawer beneath the table surface and cloud-shaped wings between the legs.

furniture from the Ming Dynasty, it is possible to understand the prevalent tastes of the time. This is known as “the spirit of the scholars.”

A unique combination of social reform and geographical conditions led to the development of Ming-style furniture. Rapid economic growth and the resumption of agricultural production coincided with a series of measures that stimulated the furniture industry. Plenty of valuable wood was being brought into the country by sea, and the rapid urbanization of the population and the construction of a large number of private gardens created a demand for good quality furniture.

The Ming Dynasty established a new Imperial Examination System, which prompted a large number of scholars to pursue



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literature, drama, painting, and other arts. Culture spread to all walks of life. Cities such as Nanjing and Suzhou became economic and cultural centers, and scholars began to write about the design, production, storage, use, and collection of furniture. In this context, Ming-style furniture flourished.

Ming-Dynasty scholars wrote a large number of books about furniture. Rather than focussing on an item's size or form, they wrote about aesthetics and taste. Ming-Dynasty scholars advocated the elegance of earlier times and the simplicity of nature. They advocated the natural beauty of timber and the concise and skilled use of certain patterns. In terms of decoration, they opposed excessive engraving and inlay. The artistry of the craftsmen and the aesthetic taste of writers are closely integrated, reflecting an age of new ideas.

Ming-style furniture was mainly made of rosewood, *jichimu*, *nanmu*, camphor, walnut, and elm, among which rosewood is considered the best. These woods have soft colors, hardness, and elasticity. Because hardwood is rare and precious, the furniture was made using simple forms and straight lines. Because of its natural colors and texture, the wood only needs to be coated with wax to highlight its beauty.

Ming-style furniture is carefully designed. Structural members are held together using delicate mortise-and-tenon joints, which are strong and can adapt to climatic changes. Some items are designed in such a way so that they correct a person's posture. Pieces are generally plain, although each part may be decorated with a small area of solid lacquer or openwork carving. Such areas can in fact emphasise the simplicity of the whole piece. The structure and decorative details follow a regular pattern, the lines of which are smooth with slight twists.

Because of their new interests and requirements, scholars of the Ming Dynasty designed and promoted a large number of

Zhang Wu Zhi (Treatise on Superfluous Things)
 Finished in 1621, the twelve volumes of the *Zhang Wu Zhi* were written by Wen Zhenheng. It is regarded as an encyclopedia of garden and interior design. Wen Zhenheng (1585–1645) was born in Suzhou, Jiangsu. He was greatly influenced by family traditions and was interested in landscape arts. *Zhang Wu Zhi* contains detailed descriptions of various items of furniture including beds, shelves, screens, chairs, stools, and cabinets, and it lists the appropriate materials, sizes, colors, and decoration for each. It advocates a natural style that avoids vulgarity.

