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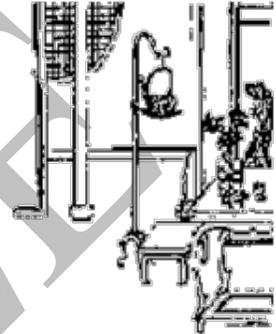
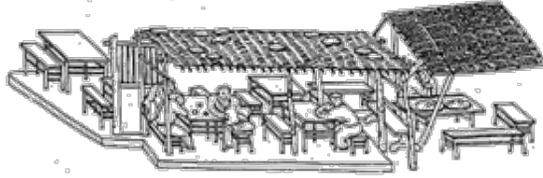
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Chinese Furniture - History and Design

The early history of Chinese furniture recorded in excavated material, engraved stone and stamped brick reveals a mat-level furniture culture. The ancient Chinese knelt or sat cross-legged upon woven mats surrounded by various furnishings including low tables, screens, and armrests. Examples of excavated lacquer furniture from the ancient kingdom of Chu (ca. 500 BC) demonstrate an aesthetic of minimalism and simplicity, and others are decorated with unique colorful patterns and bear finely carved decoration in relief and openwork. The blending of artistic form with practical functionality can be seen as a common thread running throughout the long history of Chinese furniture.

Developments toward high seating were influenced by foreign customs and the migration of Buddhism. During the second century AD, the Han emperor Lingdi was recorded to have had a fascination with things foreign, including the foreign or "barbarian" seat (*huchuang*). This term referred to the folding stool, which at that time was commonly used by nomadic tribes in the more remote northern and western regions where it was also used for mounting horses. Being easily carried over the shoulder, it quickly became a popular seat for traveling or hunting.



Low platforms were another early form of raised seating furniture which were used as honorific seats by high officials and religious dignitaries during ceremonial and sacrificial rites. Records from the Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD)

indicate that these sitting platforms were called *ta*; the relatively longer *chuang* was used both for sitting and reclining.

With the eastward migration of Buddhism from India, chairs and raised platforms began to appear with more frequency as the status enhancing seats of great masters, along with the custom of disciples gathered around seated upon stools. Hourglass-shaped stools made of straw and basketwork also begin to appear during the Northern and Southern Dynasties (386-586 AD) period; similarly shaped stools of rattan are still found throughout modern China. During the transitional period—from mat to chair—kneeling and cross-legged positions upon the seating platforms was common. Additionally, the raised platform also began to function as a large, medium-height table for dining. By the Tang dynasty (618-907 AD), stools and chairs had become common amongst the elite and those of rank. Prototypes to the yoke back chair as well as the round back chair appear in contemporary paintings and wall murals which depict the sitter with legs both pendant and crossed.

By the Northern and Southern Song (960-1279) periods, many types of high furniture had developed and were commonly used throughout all circles of life. Scenes recorded within contemporary paintings as well as archeological finds reveal that tables, chairs, stools, and benches of the architecturally related recessed-leg style were widely used.

Waisted cornerleg furniture is also evidenced in Song paintings, although, this more elegant form, with roots tracing back through Gandhara to early Greek

architecture, appears to have been reserved for the elite and for activities of ritualistic and ceremonial significance.

Many basic patterns established during the Song dynasties continued to mature throughout the Yuan and Ming periods into beautiful well-rounded and robust forms that were smoothly finished with thick lacquer coatings and finely detailed with painted decoration. During the late Ming and early Qing periods, furniture of a minimal classical style was abundantly produced in durable tropical hardwoods after a ban on imports was lifted in 1567. The use of these hard, dense woods spawned advancements in joinery techniques permitting the creation open, elegant forms previously unattainable in softer woods. This popularity of this furniture, which often reflected the restrained, elegant tastes of the scholar official's class, also spread through the rising *nouveau-riche* merchant class. After the fall of the corrupted Ming ruling house in 1644, China again flourished under the benevolent rule of the early Qing emperors. While early Qing furniture-makers generally held to classic patterns, a tendency towards refinement emerges correlating to that which permeated all of the decorative arts. Qianlong's fascination with antiquity stimulated archaic decoration and styles in furniture design. Qing-style furniture is more angular in form, and the surfaces are often elaborately decorated. It was from this basis that more modern Chinese furniture developed its distinguishing characteristics. Use of thick lacquer finish and detailed engravings and paintings as well as pragmatic design elements would continue to flourish. Significant foreign design

influence would not be felt until increased contact with the West began in the 19th century, due to efforts on the part of the ruling elite to limit trade.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties previous bans on imports were lifted, allowing for larger quantities and varieties of woods to flood in from other parts of Asia. The use of denser wood led to much finer work, including more elaborate joinery.

Chinese furniture is traditionally consisted of four distinct categories, all formed by the mid Qing dynasty, but each with its own unique characteristics.^[2]

- Beijing category (京式家具): characterized by its simple built, directly developed from Ming Dynasty furnitures.
- Guangzhou category (广式家具): incorporate western influence, formed in the 19th century. Characterized by the adoption of the decorative mounting of marble and shells of shellfish.
- Shanghai category (海式家具): characterized by its decorative sculpture and sculptured paint.
- Suzhou category (苏式家具): Opposite to Beijing category, characterized by its elaborate decoration, developed from early Qing Dynasty furnitures.

Platform construction is based on box designs and uses frame-and-panel construction in simple form during earlier periods evolving into more and more modified forms in later periods. While earlier pieces show full frame-and-panel construction techniques, different parts of the construction were modified through

the centuries to produce diverse looking pieces which still share the same basic construction. First the panel, originally complete, is subject to cut-out sections, followed by further reduction to what may appear to be simply decorative brackets. Further refinement of the same pattern lead the shape of the decorative brackets being incorporated into the shape of the surrounding frame and simultaneously the two mitered vertical pieces comprising a corner become one solid piece. Pieces start to have small cross-pieces attached to the bottom of the feet rather than a frame that is equal on all sides and finally, with evolution of the complex woodworking joints that allow it, the cross-pieces are removed entirely, leaving a modern table with 3-way mitered corners. Unlike European-derived styles, table designs based on this style will nearly always contain a frame-in-panel top, the panel serving as the tabletop center and the frame sometimes also serving as what would be rails on a European table. Cabinets in this style have a top that does not protrude beyond the sides or front. The critical element in almost all pieces of this type is the mitered joints, especially the 3-way mitered joining of the leg and two horizontal pieces at each corner.

The Yoke and Rack construction differs critically in the way that the legs of the piece are joined to the horizontal portion (be it tabletop, seat or cabinet carcass) using a type of wedged mortise-and-tenon joint where the end grain of the leg is visible as a circle in the frame of the tabletop. The cross-pieces (stretchers in the western equivalent) are joined through mortise-and-tenon joinery as well. The legs and stretchers are commonly round rather than square or curvilinear. The simplest pieces are simply four splayed legs attached to a

solid top, but more complicated pieces contain decorative brackets, drawers and metal latches. Cabinets in this style typically have an overhanging top similar to western-style cabinetry.

Bamboo construction style, although historically rooted in pieces made from bamboo, later saw many pieces made from hardwood with patterning to imitate the look of bamboo, or simply in the style of previous pieces made from bamboo. The construction is more similar to the Yoke and Rack style with some apparent crossover.

SAMPLE

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