

FRIENDS OF THE HOUSE: FURNITURE FROM CHINA'S TOWNS AND VILLAGES.

Nancy Berliner and Sarah Handler, Salem, Mass.: Peabody Essex Museum, 1996. (Peabody Essex Museum Collections Vol. 131 No. 2). Obtainable from William T. La Moy, Editor, Peabody Essex Museum Collections, Peabody Essex Museum, East India Square, Salem, Mass., USA 01970. Hard Cover ISBN 0-88389-134-4 \$50.00 USD/Soft Cover ISSN 1074-0457 \$25.00 USD. 133 pages (refer to Fig 1)

Nancy Berliner co-authored this first North American text on vernacular Chinese furniture as a companion to an exhibition she guest curated at the Peabody Essex Museum. (She also coordinated a companion exhibition of highstyle Chinese furniture at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.) The text has three main sections commencing with a paper on household life by Berliner followed by another on the recognition of vernacular furniture by Sarah Handler. Both articles are illustrated with high quality photography, papercuts and lithographs depicting furniture designs, manufacturing processes, local pas-

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By Nancy Berliner and Sarah Handler



Peabody Essex Museum

Fig 1 Low Back Chair (meiguiyi, wenyi) southern elm with traces of black lacquer over a reddish underlacquer 29" x 21.8" x 18", seat height 18.7" Shanxi province, also known as a 'rose chair' melguiyi, or 'writing chair' wenyi.

times, and domestic interiors. Of great interest to the enthusiast of the regional vernacular is the accompanying catalogue written by Handler of forty-six Chinese furniture items from private collections.

Central to everyday activities within the home, Berliner informs us, is the raised platform called a kang upon which can be found tables (kangzhuo) and kang coffers (kanggui). The kang may be used as an area for storage, food preparation, eating and sleeping. In addition, forms illustrated specifically used in Far Eastern religious ceremonies include wine tables (jiuzhuo), shrines (shenchu), and altar tables (gongzhuo). Having no western counterpart are the stool-like headrests used as pillows. Other furniture illustrated includes bamboo chairs (zhuyi), rootwood stools (dengs), and southern elm alcove beds (babu chuang). Furniture is made from softwoods such as elm, nanmu, willow, cedar, camphor and fir with secondary woods of pine. They are finished in brown, black, red, orange, and yellow lacquers as well as red pigments. Decorations include brass mounts and sliding bolts, chrysanthemum-shaped washers, lotus-bud end-plates, and multi-coloured inset stones or stone slabs.

The geographical areas covered in the text include the provinces of (in decreasing numbers of furniture illustrated) Shanxi, Hebei, Henan, Jiangsu, Shandong, Shaanxi, and Zhejiang, the majority of which flank the seaboard north of Shanghai. Handler states that, in general, the furniture from the northern provinces studied are 'vigorous, exaggerated, and flamboyant', while southern furniture tends to be 'restrained and refined' (page 35). The researchers are not always sure where the furniture originated and have not yet broken down provincial boundaries into cultural regions. As in any study of vernacular furniture, only in rare instances can artifacts be dated precisely. However, the majority of furniture appears to have been made in the 18th and 19th centuries (latter Qing dynasty)

The exchange of designs between east and west is referred to. The Chinese used folding chairs, armchairs, square tables, and chests, as in the west. Handler notes that folding stools differ from western prototypes in that the sitters' legs hang over the seat frame in Chinese tradition (page 39). Twisted rootwood stools, shaped similar to Taihu garden rocks, would not be out of place in English grottos. In ongoing research Berliner is aware of the Chinese contribution to the cabinet-

maker Thomas Chippendale's furniture designs and is attempting to trace the roots of the cabriole leg used in Chinese tables and chair foot-rests.

Handler examines and interprets the carved rebus messages emblazoned on some of the softwood furniture. Dragons depict status, fish represent plenty (and when placed upon beds suggest fecundity and the production of many sons), bats counsel blessing and good fortune, and a pair of phoenix birds portend marital bliss. She skilfully attempts to trace the roots of design features, such as the cloudhead foot. In addition, the vernacular is distinguished from highstyle by the use of exposed tenons, pipejoints on both round and square-backed chairs, board seats rather than hard or soft mats, and the use of softwood rather than hardwood. Design and construction features are discussed such as the spandrels linking backs of chairs and armrests, fan-shaped seats, bamboo bending techniques, protruding crest-rails, and corner wood-strip reinforcements.

Handler claims the purpose behind this brief but highly informative introductory publication is to inspire an epiphany of recognition and a subsequent extended examination and appreciation of vernacular furniture (page 36). As a result of this publication the reader is motivated to ask more questions than the authors answer, thus encouraging future research.

Dr. J. L. Cook