

SHANXI PROVINCE: EARLY VERNACULAR FURNITURE

In 1997 I made my first trip to China looking for old furniture and other antiques in general.

Like many others I ended up somewhere near Ningbo city where a couple of Chinese dealers had specialized in restoring and trading old/antique furniture.

This was Zhejiang province, home of the famous wedding cabinet.

Almost endless were the rows of these red lacquered cabinets with their large brass lock plates in those early days!

But the working area of these Zhejiang dealers was bigger than their province alone and goods from other provinces entered their warehouses- it took a while to learn and recognise what was from where.

With the demand from the West ever increasing, their buying territories expanded to match demand, further and further.

-Rustic elm furniture from Shandong province in the North-East, always one of my favorites.

-Sturdy stools and benches from Anhui province.

-Posh furniture with lots of carving and gold from Fujian province, not so much my favorite.....

Sometimes one would find something that looked older than all other things or stood out otherwise. And always it's background was the same province, Shanxi, some 750km to the SW of Beijing.

Besides catching the eye, Shanxi furniture was also expensive compared to furniture from other provinces; that was something I had to get used to.

Shanxi was far away and the cost of transportation certainly had an impact on the prices.

In 1998 I changed to Beijing as hunting ground because I expected that the "Shanxi furniture road" was leading to there due to the shorter distance. That proved to be true. From there I builded a network of dealers that I visited a couple of times a year to check their stock, looking for interesting pieces.

The age of the pieces of furniture I found in the warehouses stayed a riddle for quite some time. One could have a hunch that A was older than B but how much older or how old anyway was not clear.

Chinese dealers didn't know either and were mostly specialised in wild guesses. Books on the topic in English, as far as available at that time, dated furniture with a margin of 150 to 200 years; not exactly helpful....

What I didn't know for some time is there had been published an important book on Shanxi furniture specifically in 1999; the result of the cooperation between the Chinese furniture dealer/collector Co La Ma and the American researcher Curtis Evarts. This book, C.L. Ma Collection- Traditional Furniture from the Greater Shanxi Region, broke the clouds open. Long talks with Zhang Li, dealer and researcher, taught me a lot as well, especially regarding dating lacquer.

Shanxi turned out to be a treasury box full with very old pieces.

In the Ningbo warehouses the common furniture wasn't older than 1850-1900.

Among the Shanxi furniture in the Beijing warehouses one could find pieces from around 1600 or even before.

There are explanations for this difference in age:

-The climate in the S-E provinces like Zhejiang is humid and the type of wood primarily used is fir. This is not a good combination for a piece of furniture to survive over a long period of time.

I also have the suspicion that there has been more destruction in Zhejiang during the Cultural Revolution than in other regions. This hunch is based on what I have seen.

-Shanxi was a rich province with better houses and a climate with cold winters and hot, dry summers. (For a long period of time Shanxi was a place of exile. The result was an accumulation of power and wealth. When during the Opium War in the 19th century the emperor needed money to finance the war, he had to turn to the Shanxi bankers).

Important is that the types of wood used for furniture making in Shanxi were stronger than in the S-E provinces, mainly elmwood.

Working with Shanxi furniture over a long period of time made grow a deep respect for the craftsmanship and esthetical aspects; especially so regarding the early pieces.

Finally there's an odd thing about Shanxi people: they supposedly never throw anything away. How ridiculous it may seem, maybe it's also part of the explanation why one finds so much more very old pieces there than in other parts of China.