

# Study on the Characteristics and Influence of Export Furniture in Ming and Qing Dynasties

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**Abstract**—During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the opening of the Maritime Silk Road gave both the West and the East a chance to have direct dialogue with each other. Thanks to the impetus of the "Chinese fever" in Europe, a large number of furniture with distinctive Chinese and Western combined characteristics in shapes, decorative patterns and craft structures is exported from Guangzhou to Europe and the United States in a customized way. As an important carrier for the cultural and artistic exchange between China and Western countries, Guangzhou's export furniture promotes the innovation of European furniture crafts, and continuously injects fresh blood into the development of the "Chinese" decorative style; on the other hand, Guangzhou's artisans accepted and absorbed Western decorative arts and crafts in the long-term export trading, and finally formed the "Guang Zuo" furniture with distinctive style and far-reaching impact. The cultural blending characteristics of Guangzhou's export furniture clearly show the unique situation of the encounter between Chinese and Western cultures during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, which is extremely helpful in deepening the study of cross-cultural art.

**Keywords**—*export furniture; oriental trading; Chinoiserie; Cantonese-style furniture*

## I. INTRODUCTION

It's well-known that the beauty of the prosperous world depicted in the book *The Travels of Marco Polo* is like a magical force that constantly prompts Europeans to explore the world outside, and finally breaks the geographical barrier between the East and the West, which has contributed to the arrival of the great maritime era. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the value of the new-opened Eastern Maritime route was not only to satisfy Europeans' strong desire to purchase Chinese goods, but the cultural and artistic exchanges between the two sides through material exchange. Their connections have flourished like a little spark can cause a conflagration. As a witness and participant in cultural integration, Guangzhou's export furniture was born in a special period when Chinese and western cultures encountered directly. During the 300-odd history of development, the export-oriented furniture specially made for the European and American markets have had a major impact on interior decoration and furniture design in both parties.

## II. DEVELOPMENT OF GUANGZHOU'S EXPORT FURNITURE TRADING

Adjacent to the South China Sea, Guangzhou is the sea gate of the Pearl River. There exist records about export trading as early as the Qin and Han Dynasties. At the same time, the well-developed inland river route of the Pearl River Basin makes it very convenient to make trade exchanges with neighboring provinces. It is precisely because of the capability for sea transportation and river transportation endowed by its superior geographical location, Guangzhou has become an important pier for foreign maritime trading throughout dynasties. Although the Ming and Qing dynasties were hesitate at foreign trade issues and the ban on maritime trade was not fixed, Guangzhou was always the only one port capable to conduct trade. Feng Chengyu said in the note on the *Hai Lu* volume: "Since the beginning of the 16th century, Guangzhou has monopolized the route of the South West Sea, and the Western Ocean Shipping Ship has been shipped to Guangzhou." [1] In particular, during the 85 years from 1757 to 1842, Guangzhou has not only become the only port for economic and trade exchanges between China and foreign countries, but also the only window for scientific and technological exchanges thanks to the implementation of the "one-stop trade" system.

The earliest arrival to the East during the Ming and Qing Dynasties was the Portuguese. The merchant ship departing from Lisbon arrived in Tuen Mun in 1514. It finally occupied Macao with the excuse that "their tributes were wet and needed place for cool." in 1553 after many tries. They also obtained the endorse from Chinese government to make maritime trade, thus Macao served as a foreign port of Guangzhou to establish trade routes and make trade directly with China. However, the Spanish who followed were not so lucky. They could not obtain a license to conduct trade with China directly because of the interferences from Portuguese and other reasons. So the Spanish were forced to take a roundabout tactic. They occupied Cebu Island in the Philippines in 1565, occupied Manila six years later, and used it as a trading base for the Far East. According to records, "In the 1570s, the number of Chinese merchant ships to Manila every year was 12-15, and it increased year by year, and reached 60 at most." [2] Later, merchants of Netherlands, the United Kingdom, France, Denmark, Sweden and other countries rushed to China to trade with Guangzhou. It was during this period that a large number of

exported furniture produced in Guangzhou was exported to Europe and the United States through international trade routes.

The export furniture in Guangzhou is mainly dominant by lacquer furniture, hardwood furniture and bamboo furniture. At the end of the 16th century, the Portuguese brought the lacquered furniture to Europe (see "Fig. 1"), and the Europeans were quickly attracted to this lustrous, ornately decorated furniture. But because of the small number, the beautifully crafted lacquered furniture is a luxury that most European aristocrats can't afford. From 1580 to 1598, there was a black lacquered folding chair exported from Macao in the residence of Philip II of the Escorial Monastery. This chair, which has accompanied the kings of Spain and Portugal in their later years, is perhaps the earliest written record of Guangzhou's export-painted furniture. After the promotion of Portuguese and the Spanish, the Dutch East India Company officially brought the lacquer furniture into the European market in the middle and late 17th century. They shipped a large number of Guangzhou lacquered furniture and distributed them to European countries for sale, which set off a craze for lacquer ware in Europe. Paint furniture also became a symbol of wealth and status. This craze lasted for a long time. In the large number of palaces, manors, villas and houses built or renovated in the 17th and 18th centuries, there must be a special room to showcase their collections of lacquered furniture. "In the middle of the 17th century, the mother of Louis XIV (Anna of Austria) collected a dozen Chinese lacquered screens and displayed them. In addition to the Palace of Versailles, important ministers of Louis XIV such as Richelieu, Masalin and Corbe are also Chinese art lovers who purchased many collections and showcased them in their homes. Germany's Prussian, Bavarian, Saxony and other principalities have also joined the ranks of chasing Chinese furniture..."[3]



Fig. 1. The export watercolor painting of the Guangzhou Painted Furniture Manufacturing Workshop, in the 1830s.

Chinese traditional hardwood furniture was not included in the collection list by European and American collectors till late 19th century. However, there have been many records of the export of hardwood furniture made for the European and American markets. The Guangzhou export hardwood furniture in the 18th century seems to have been specially tailored to Western tastes: parts of them are used to

decorate the East India Company's trade offices in the Far East and various private residential and leisure residences. For example, the list of assets in the ledgers of the British East India Company in the 1720s to 1730s shows that dozens of furniture is added per year. In addition, there are many records in documents about the whole process from ordering customized furniture in Guangzhou, using them in base positions for trading, to shipping them back to the mother country of the owners. However, compared with lacquered furniture, the cost of hardwood furniture is low. A large amount of export hardwood furniture in Guangzhou, which was specially customized for buyers in the 18th century, could not be recorded. At the end of the 18th century, Fan Balan brought back a large number of customized hardwood furniture produced in Guangzhou, including desks, chairs, bookcases, etc. Among them, the ice-frozen cabinet was considered to be the most classic work in export hardwood furniture. Together with the rest of his Chinese collection, these pieces of furniture were used to decorate his new manor with pagoda-shape building in Philadelphia.

Bamboo furniture was also exported to Europe and the United States in the 18th century. (See "Fig. 2") It is speculated that bamboo furniture first appeared in merchant ships carrying Chinese goods. It won the favor of Western crew members because it is cool and has elastic characteristics. The list of items in the Chinese Palace in Stockholm in 1777 records two China-made bamboo tables. At the same time, there are also records of Chinese bamboo chairs in other palaces in Sweden. After finishing his tenure in the US Consul in Guangzhou in the early 19th century, Edward Carrington brought home a lot of furniture from Guangzhou, including extended bamboo lounge chairs collected at the Rhode Island Historical Society. During this time, a variety of bamboo furniture was brought to the east coast of the United States and appeared in American homes. Among the many existing export-oriented bamboo furniture, the furniture in the "Chinese Room" of Brighton's King's Court is the most famous one. This series of bamboo furniture was considered to be brought to the UK from Guangzhou in the late 18th century and the early 19th century. The emergence of bamboo furniture makes this extremely luxurious Rococo style space much cooler.



Fig. 2. The export watercolor painting of the Guangzhou Export Bamboo Furniture Workshop, in the 1830s.

### III. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF GUANGZHOU'S EXPORT FURNITURE

Due to the lack of relevant literature support and the physical objects, it is difficult to see the exported furniture before the 17th century. However, we can probably indicate that the export furniture of Guangzhou in this period has no big difference from the traditional Ming furniture given the unstable trade environment and the immature market at the time. In the 17th century, when the Netherlands and the United Kingdom and other European countries established the East India Company, the style of Guangzhou's export furniture has a clear development direction, although there may be some differences in the products of different ages. On the whole, the vast majority of Guangzhou's export furniture after the 17th century was tailor-made for markets in Europe and later, the United States, as well as the maritime conditions at that time. Therefore, it is characterized by the combination of Chinese and Western and innovation in structure.

#### A. Western Style Following the Trend

Among the many export products, furniture is one of the few products that have both decorative and functional functions. Therefore, in order to better conform to the European way of use, and meet its pursuit of "Chinese sentiment", East India companies in European countries have put forward their own requirements for the style of export furniture. While gaining residency in Macao by bribing Guangdong officials, the Portuguese were allowed to send merchants directly to Guangzhou to participate in biannual trade fairs before the 1630s, and then traded through valet trading. Portuguese merchants ordered customized furniture through Chinese agents, and the agent is responsible for organizing production. At the end of the Ming Dynasty, Qu Dajun wrote in the "Guangdong New Language" that "the Australians are rich, ... every time they carry millions of platinum, and the responsible Fujian people divided them and distributed them to workers to obtain Chinese gadgets, which brought huge profit in the long-term." [4] After the UK obtained the right to direct trade with China in 1683, it brought the latest lacquer prototype to Guangzhou and sent British artisans to supervise the production of furniture.

The craftsmen of Guangzhou in the 17th and 18th centuries can be said to know everything about the development of furniture design trends in Europe. The Bureau - Bookcase was originally a unique American style of furniture, but was introduced to the UK in the mid-18th century and is known as the Chippendale Style. (See "Fig. 3") During this period, among the existing furniture, a large number are similar to the export Guangzhou furniture. The bookcase is generally divided into upper and lower parts: the lower part is a drawer with an expandable table top; the upper part has a pair of cabinet doors, with a triangular plaque on top; the cabinet has many storage inside in the compartment, the "Chinese theme" decorative painting is painted on the door of the middle compartment. Due to its complex structure and beautiful decoration, this huge furniture is one of the most luxurious styles in Guangzhou's export furniture. In addition, there is a British-style game

table exported to in the United States, made from about 1775 to 1780. Its legs are straight and three-legged, the foot ends are claw-shaped, the legs and table sides are carved with the ornamentation of the leaves. A backgammon board can be seen after opening the tabletop. The board is inlaid with milky white ivory and black sandalwood. The black and white pattern of the center of the board is composed of diamond pattern wrapped medals. Interestingly, the furniture from the overall size, the interior style of the board to the pattern in the center of the board is almost exactly the same as the backgammon board mentioned in the furniture list for Paxton Villa in England by Chippendale in 1774. It is natural that current scholars were skeptical whether the so-called European "prototypes" came from the hands of Guangzhou artisans given the fact that Guangzhou craftsmen were skillful in grasping the trend at that time.



Fig. 3. Chippendale bookcase for export in Guangzhou, in the mid-18th century.

#### B. Oriental Decorative Patterns

Although the style of most export furniture are Western style, Chinese-style patterns with oriental characteristics are highly favored due to the love of "Chinese taste" in the European market, During the Louis XV period, France shipped a large number of well-made raw furniture to Guangzhou, and then shipped it back to France after completing the production of enamel paint and gold. In the Beijing Art Collection Fair held at the Beijing Agricultural Exhibition Center in 2005, an 18th-century writing desk completed by French and China was exhibited. The shape and structure of the table is the standard Louis XV furniture, but the black lacquered and gold decoration is a typical Chinese style.

European's obsession with lacquer ware and Chinese ornamentation in the 17th and 18th centuries led them to focus on the wooden lacquer screen. (See "Fig. 4") According to the purchase lists of Spanish, Dutch, French and British merchant ships, the quantity of lacquer screen

accounts for a high proportion among all exported furniture. For example, the "Amphitence" full of tribute and return for Louis XIV and the Emperor Qianlong shipped 36 screens and 4 boxes of single screens except for the gift to the French King when it returned to France for the first time in 1700. After the goods were sold, they immediately sailed to Guangzhou and brought back 45 boxes of screens in 1703. In addition, 13 lacquer ware products, 14 small lacquer cabinets and 70 curtain screens were found in a 1702 British merchant ship that was salvaged. This kind of export screen is usually made of black lacquer gold. After unfolding, it can form a complete picture. The theme of the decoration is the oriental landscape, harbor style, garden figures, bamboo stone birds and folk story or bottle flower map, etc. favored by European.



Fig. 4. Black lacquered gold screen in Guangzhou, in the 18th century.

### C. Structure Design Easy for Transportation

In order to better adapt to the small space of the cabin and carry more cargo as much as possible, the large-scale Guangzhou export adopted the modular design similar to modern product design. The Chippendale bookcase mentioned above adopts this design, and the bracket legs at the bottom of the cabinet can also be disassembled, except that the main body of the furniture can be divided into upper and lower parts. This design is not only convenient for transportation, but also facilitates replacement of parts: in order to save space, or due to damage during transportation, many bracket feet are made after arriving in Europe. Moreover, the desk's main body, the upper bookcase and other large furniture are equipped with beautiful copper large handles on both sides, which are obviously provided for easy handling. Therefore, we can infer that these furniture need to be transported several times: from the woodworking workshop to the ship, and then may be used in another Eastern port or colony for a period of time, then moved back to the ship and shipped to Europe and the United States. There is also a unique wardrobe made in the late 18th century, which is now collected in the Peabody Museum. This closet is actually composed of two cabinets with almost the same shape and decoration. The cabinet feet are short

cone shape, and the middle of the cabinet door is decorated with snail lacquered panels. The top of the cabinet has legs. The upper cabinet feet are embedded in the legs at the top of the lower cabinet, so they can be used individually or in combination depending on the situation. (See "Fig. 5")



Fig. 5. Guangzhou export drawing table with copper handle and candle holder, in the 1730s.

## IV. THE IMPACT OF GUANGZHOU'S EXPORT FURNITURE

A large number of furniture with distinctive Chinese and Western characteristics is exported overseas through Guangzhou. On the surface, it seems to be the process which Europeans are chasing aesthetic needs and Chinese are chasing greater profit. However, in essence, export furniture, as a carrier of cultural communication, influences the Chinese and Western sides from different angles and at different levels. In the process of production and exporting, the furniture promoted the innovation of European furniture crafts and injected fresh blood into the development of "Chinese style" in Europe; on the other hand, in the long-term export trade, Guangzhou also accepted and absorbed the western decorative art, and laid the foundation for the formation of the "Guang Zuo" furniture style.

### A. Promoting the Innovation of Furniture Manufacturing Process

Due to the high cost of exporting lacquer ware, Europeans have spared no effort in the imitation of Chinese lacquer ware in order to reduce costs. The Italian scientist and Jesuit Bernard published a detailed report on Chinese lacquer ware in 1720. Amsterdam in the Netherlands is one of the regions in Europe that began to imitate Chinese lacquer ware earlier. In 1612, the famous Dutch furniture designer William Keller built a counterfeit Chinese cabinet at the request of the Governor to match the other imported Chinese cabinets as a gift to the Turkish Sultan [5]. In the 17th century, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Belgium, Germany and other places have records of lacquer production. In the 18th century, France entered the golden age of lacquer production. The French Martin brothers were famous in Europe for decorating the interior and furniture of Versailles by using the "Martin paint" invented by them. From the French philosopher Voltaire who has a good

impression of Chinese civilization, his voice of joy in his "Erga Collection": "Martin's lacquer cabinet is better than the Chinese ware", it's easy to understand the new achievements that the West has made in emulating Chinese decorative art [6]. The lacquer ware production in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries was developed on the basis of imitation of Chinese lacquer ware. Although the furniture shapes and decorative patterns vary from place to place, the imitation furniture shows a strong Chinese element.

### B. Promoting the Development of European Decorative Arts

The European nobility who bought the export furniture in Guangzhou did not satisfy with their identity of collectors. Instead, they did their best to promote Chinese art that traveled across the ocean as an art promoter. In order to satisfy the desire of the Eastern world, they rushed to create a variety of magnificent Chinese rooms in the private space, including bedrooms, study rooms, and living rooms, even public spaces. The Chinese elements of this period have neither the mysterious and eccentric atmosphere nor the solemn image of the Manchu aristocracy. Instead, they are cheerful and happy. The bits and pieces in the room all show the Europeans' love for Chinese culture. This highly influential decorative technique is continually integrated with the local cultures of European countries, and finally the interior style of the "Chinese style" swept the whole Europe and has a far-reaching influence.

The export of a large number of Chinese art represented by Guangzhou's export furniture not only directly contributed to the birth of the new European decorative style in the 17th and 18th centuries. At the same time, the exquisite decorative paintings and patterns on the exported furniture have become the source of the inspiration of Western artists. In addition to the original functions of the furniture, European artists and designers have creatively given the interior decoration function of the lacquer furniture. For example, the lacquer furniture such as the screen, cabinet and wooden box was dismantled into slabs and inlaid in the siding after being delivered to Europe, using the beautifully decorated patterns to decorate the room. The owner of the house will also hire the most famous local craftsmen and painters to draw the same decorative paintings on the basis of the patterns and themes of these exported lacquer panels, and in order to match the color of the exported lacquer furniture, the interior design of Europe during this period is usually a combination of black, red and gold. This multi-faceted interpretation of the export furniture is no longer a stereotyped combination of pieces, nor a non-thinking imitation. Instead, it innovates and transforms Chinese art and spreads them as decorative elements in every corner of the room. In the Chateau de Versailles, the Pagoda Palace in the Schloss Nymphenburg in Germany, the Schloss Charlottenburg in Germany, the Palazzo Reale in Italy (see "Fig. 6"), the Palazzo Realedi Milano, the Schloss Schönbrunn in Austria, and many other palace and villas decorated "Chinese rooms" in this way.



Fig. 6. "China" room decorated with black lacquered lacquered wood panels in the Royal Palace of Turin.

### C. Promoting the Formation of New Furniture Style

The communication and exchange of economy and culture will always be two-way, bringing tens of thousands of international shipping routes to China's export products, and making Guangzhou the center of economic and cultural exchanges between China and the West. The craftsmen of Guangzhou have accumulated experience in the long-term production of export furniture. At the same time, European merchant ships also brought a steady stream of high-quality hardwood wood, decorative materials and the latest European furniture styles for Guangzhou, which gave the craftsmen more freedom to carry out furniture creation. Therefore, Guangzhou furniture has formed its own unique style in the early days, as described by Mr. Wang Shizhen: "The early hardwood furniture of Guangzhou, even if it is called Ming style, and what is seen in Beijing's East and West Hills, is not a family of genus." Finally, during the Qianlong period, the famous Cantonese-style furniture was formed, commonly known as "Guang Zuo".

This form is sturdy and stable. Cantonese-style furniture that is meticulous in production inherits Chinese traditional culture, and accepts and integrates the style of European furniture. Europe's influence on Cantonese-style furniture is reflected in the following three aspects: First, the style of Cantonese furniture is influenced by the Rococo style. Its style is no longer dominated by calm and solemn straight line, but by the sporty curve. For example, although the chair form adopts the most common method of waist-waist in the middle of the Qing Dynasty, the shape of the wide-style furniture table and legs often adopts the "C"-shaped "shrimp foot" or "S"-shaped three-bend leg. (See "Fig. 7")



Fig. 7. Cantonese style rosewood carved chair, Qianlong period of the Qing dynasty.

Secondly, Cantonese-style furniture uses Western craftsmanship techniques, such as glass painting techniques and enamel crafts. The glass painting was introduced to China from Europe in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, and it has matured during the Qianlong period and became one of the important paintings of Guangzhou's export paintings. Due to the preference of the rulers, the glass paintings were quickly applied to the decoration of the screen-type furniture, which became an important embellishment of the interior while retaining the western charm.

Third, the Cantonese style furniture, which is deeply influenced by Western culture, has its own unique choices for patterns and themes: when expressing traditional themes, the patterns are processed and many Western elements are added, such as eucalyptus leaf, roll grass, passionflower and so on. Cantonese-style furniture "uses both Chinese decorative patterns and western decorative patterns in the same piece of furniture...and does not give people a strong sense of attachment. Instead, there is a natural beauty." [7]

The formation of Cantonese-style furniture not only broke the original pattern of traditional Chinese furniture, but also accelerated the formation of Qing style furniture style, as well as made the "Guang Zuo" equal to "Jing Zuo" and "Su Zuo", becoming one of the three masterpieces of the Qing Dynasty.

## V. CONCLUSION

During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, a large number of furniture made in Guangzhou specifically for the European and American markets were exported to Europe, and showed the characteristics of Western-style, Chinese-style patterns and easy-to-transport. The export of Guangzhou furniture is not only a simple process of the trading from East to West, but also profoundly affects the development of European decorative arts, and promotes the innovation of European furniture manufacturing process. At the same time, in the

process of furniture manufacturing and export, Guangzhou breeds a new style of furniture that is different from traditional Ming furniture. In the period of more than three hundred years in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, it was through the furniture; both sides of the East and West actively and frequently accepted, learned and exported culture, and realized creation and regeneration in the process of communication in a positive and open attitude. The diversity of culture and art can also continue to develop in the blending of culture.

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