

From the Dream Land to the Reality

- China Buying Trips and Antiques

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In the spring you asked,
When will my chair arrive?
My TV cabinet, and my armoire?

I sit in my dark room,
Counting each blessing as it arrives.

Someone screamed outside,
Fire! A fire wood
As they called it in China,
A bench with a cloud design
Sawn into a thick plank top
Where a carpenter called it a bed at night,
With dreams filled for home.

How many times must we come to recognize
The origin of our stories, this land,
So full of surprises, marvel,
And wondrous things you and I call miracles?

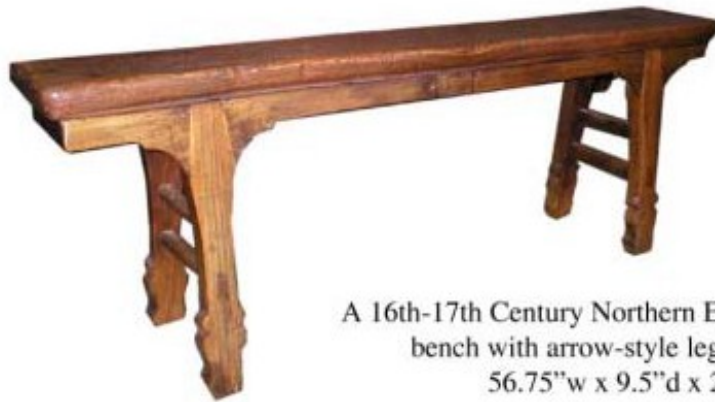
Counting my blessings,
I welcome you again, as my guest
To this house, empty not
But full of furniture
Wakening
With the light from the early dawn.

The Preface

Chinese have a saying- "Life is like a theater. Vice versa, theater is like life". It offers a concept that, within the realm of a real life, there is little difference between the act of life and the performance of the man-making. This progression of the unforeseen and unpredictable natural force that coincides with and embraces the whole civilization of mankind creates a common ground, a soft cushion, for the later generations, a common ground we may recognize as history today.

A history is neutral. It is neither right, nor wrong. It offers facts that disregard a human's own wish or desire. It is with this history, this common ground that the universe continues, allowing all substances to sink in, to grow, and all diversities to emerge. In the material life of modern day, one is faced in life at all times with thousands of choices, including that of the emotion and of the spirit. Without this common ground, this natural force that coincides with the human behaviors, one is forever lost in the progression of life.

This is how my journey began.



A 16th-17th Century Northern Elm single-board top bench with arrow-style legs and joinery.
56.75"w x 9.5"d x 20.25"h

China and the Origin

In 1985, China had just begun its open policy for trading. Many of the Taiwanese merchants secretly headed to China for trading. All the Four-Star and the Five-Star newly renovated western style hotels in Shanghai were crowded with merchants from Taiwan, along with some others from other parts of the world, waiting anxiously to hit the biggest deals in their lifetime, diving into this mysterious economy zone behind the once-called "Iron Wall".

On a gray, misty day in the year of 1985, coming from a small town in California, I landed in Shanghai, once the "Pearl Harbor of the East" city, carrying two empty suitcases in my hands. Without making a reservation ahead of time, a taxi driver drove me to then the oldest trading-hospitality hotel in Shanghai-the "Old Zhen-Zhaing Mansion"-as the local Shanghai people called it.

The next morning, I got up at four or five o'clock in order to start my exploration early. It was still dark. Twilight at far distance mingled with the dark clouds. After wandering on a few streets, I was immediately drawn to a small window steaming with hot air from the morning pork buns which locals frequented. After devouring a couple of these delicious soft creatures, I again wandered to a line of crowds on a street, under a pale early dawn, stretched as if endlessly without an origin being seen.

I got into the line quickly, with an abrupt instinct to be part of something important. I asked the guy next to me what the line was for, after I had found a safe place in the line. He gave me a strange look, since I did not dress lavishly yet it was obvious to him that, with my “Oriental face” and a no-accent Mandarin, I might be one of “them” from a different “Chinese place”. It turned out that the crowd was waiting there for a grocery store to open, where eggs such novelty item then could be purchased with the government-issued food ticket which was the Chinese Currency then for purchasing any necessity types of grocery.

Little did I know this dark halo of the early dawn that morning would turn into something important and long lasting in my memory! Twenty years later on another hazy day, as I gazed into a showroom filled with both the antique and the newly designed and made Chinese home furnishings, imported for the increasingly more popular demand in the United States, I remembered this halo, this tiny thing. It is as if though I could hear it. It is like something delicate that twigs in a cold winter air or something fragile and dark that emerges, like slow water flowing over the rocks in a dark hour, has activated the fascination and the imagination of the human heart and mind.



Tenjing style side board cabinet - A 19th century Tenjing style side board cabinet with rare large-sized old brass fittings in an original, unfinished black lacquer finish. (55.5”w x 27.5”d x 36.25”h)



A 19th Century glazed clay garden stool.
11.5" w x 11.5" d x 16" h

The Buying Trips and the People

1. The warehouses

As I recall my early buying trips in China from during the mid 80's to the mid 1990's, it was not at all easy and as convenient to get around in the Chinese countryside as it is today. My agent, Mr. Ruan, is a local Mainland Chinese. Some of the places we went were only a few hours' drive from his hometown. But because many of these places were often very small towns and not listed on the local Chinese maps, at the beginning of our buying search, we did not always know where to find these places or the people to buy antiques from. Often we were told that so-and-so in that town sold old Chinese wood pieces. It was not unusual that we were lost or spending all day trying to get to one place.

I remember one instance very well. One day my agent and I were riding on a taxi. The driver and my agent were having a hard time finding the place we wanted to go. They had asked the local people by the roadside many times where this place or town might be. But no one seemed to know. It was getting dark. The driver started to have a weary look on his face. He was reluctant to accompany us and drive us further. Finally he confessed. He was worried that we might be mugged by the local bandits who often carried guns.

We did eventually arrive at this place, which was a dark warehouse without electricity. The courteous owner and his workers had already brightened their kitchen with oil lamps, and the stove was hot with steaming cooked food waiting for our arrival. Of course, we were also rewarded with some great finds of which we came for.

During those early buying trips, my time away from my business in the United States was often too short for my agent and I to get to as many cities and places as we would like to. We often worked as many as 10 to 15 hours a day or more, going from one place to another and sometimes one city to another or several within a day's schedule.

Once, we even knocked at a local dealer's door at 2:00 AM, after we had been shopping all night long at another place in a nearby town. We woke this poor guy up, who had been

falling asleep after he had been waiting from the previous afternoon for us to finish our shopping at another place, until it was his turn to sell. By then, he had been waiting for over twelve hours for our arrival and was tired. I could not remember if he had no phone or if we could not call him from where we were.

Way back then, it was not always easy to get hold of someone with a telephone outside the central city area. Sometimes there was no phone or only one phone was available in a whole village. Whoever owned a house phone would then need to go to knock at another person's door to let the person know that there was a phone call waiting for the person. I believe in many areas in China today, there are still many people who do not own a house phone. Instead, the Mobil phones have become incredibly popular in China as the primary source for telecommunication.

Many Chinese traders dealing in wooden objects and old furniture pieces resided in the countryside where they could better afford to build or buy warehouses for storage. The land was incredibly inexpensive, compared to the western standard, as was the labor. It was very cheap for them to build their own warehouses and storage facilities. It was not unusual that, after a few years' hard work and success in business, the owners of these businesses were able to afford to build several warehouses or houses from their successful businesses. It was a faster speed than the average Americans replacing their vehicles over the length of their lifetime.

But this phenomenon of success was not an extreme example for the Chinese during those years under China's open policy for the new economy. It was the same for many other professions. Basically, for the local Chinese, whoever was willing to work very hard and engaged in a business could have an opportunity to be financially successful, and very successful.

After these antique businesses had become more successful, they often needed more space to stock up more merchandise for client's selections, and to house the often-huge facilities with much labor for refinishing, packing, and shipping to overseas. It was not unusual that a business would have two or three separate storage warehouses that were a few streets away from each other and, in some cases, with different warehouses in the next nearby town. This is also partially due to their purchasing routes for the merchandise and what overall made it easier for their specialty collections, refinishing, and transportation of the merchandise.

Since hiring labor for these businesses was more than relatively inexpensive, most of them kept plenty of help on hand at all times as part of the extended big family to do whatever and whenever the work they needed to do. I believe this still is the case for many places in China except the coastal areas where the economic growth has made the land and everything much more expensive than it used to be.

Many of the workers and helps were family members, relatives, and others from poorer areas. They were introduced or recommended by other relatives and friends to have come to work for the particular merchant. Some of them were compensated with food and

housing. Some were compensated with small amount of money of which they often sent back to their families-often the wives, the children, and the old parents living in the more remote areas or provinces.

It was relatively inexpensive for these countryside businesses to keep sufficient labor on hand. On the other hand, these workers from the poorer areas acquired better life than what they could have had working in their hometowns. Often they were farmers and had left their towns due to a drought or a bad crop. They had been taught on their new job sites useful skills in the industry, which allowed some of them to later work for another business or the same business for more pay.

Usually the workers who were from far away provinces or towns were allowed a trip home once a year for a month during the Lunar Chinese New Year. Many of them traveled a week or more, by train, bus, boat, and sometimes walking too, just to get home. During the month of January and February, it was common that most wood factories would shut down their productions in order to allow their workers to go home to see their families and to return to the same work place afterwards.

2. The business of buying

Some places in the countryside where we have purchased more extensively, might have as many as ten to twenty workers available to help during the entire time of our purchase. Many of them helped in moving items around the warehouse where often there was no lighting. Sometimes the hand-held lights were used, in case items might miss being seen from the dark corners.

Out of the group of the workers, usually one person, a closer family member or relative of the business owner, was considered “the head accountant” and did the bookkeeping for the seller’s side for the purchases.

This “head accountant” often had a follower who confirmed the purchases by repeating verbally along the side of the “head accountant” the purchased items and the prices to the “head accountant”, and served as a “double-check” for mistakes. This follower sometimes also repeated in writing as well as the “head accountant” did, and served as an extra “backup” for the records.

Others wrote down separate information for the items my agent or I pointed at or had committed to purchase-the description of the item, the age, and the wood, if such information were available. More importantly, the head of the woodworking and refinishing department was often called in after we had purchased. He either wrote down or listened to our requests for the refinishing for any particular item, if so required. In most cases, we really had to insist that these requests be written down to avoid the mistakes or later confusions.

Refinishing being essential to the look and the integrity of the merchandise, my agent and I often tried our best to specify adequate refinishing for each of our items. This could require a lot of energy and time, going through many pieces that filled one or several

containers. At the end of a long day, after having seen and made purchases over many pieces of merchandise, often I was too wiped out to even walk or eat!

We quite often took a long time in negotiating prices for the items. This was because we often only picked what we liked, out of a group or a showroom full of items. The seller was often reluctant to sell only the best pieces out of his full selection without being adequately compensated. Over the course of twenty years, I have been lucky to learn, with my eyes and from the experiences, sharing the Chinese experts' expertise and knowledge, why one item might cost four times more than another similar item.

It is worth mentioning that, at some of these business places, often there were a few helpers who just hung around, doing nothing, but watched us during our entire touring and buying for the merchandise. It is as if though their job was simply to observe us, to study us for our buying moods and our likes and dislikes for the merchandise, particularly if we were drawn to some items. This could surely build a good foundation in advance for the seller when the time had come in negotiating the prices and in helping selling more.

Some friends used to joke about it- "If you find something you like, pretend you haven't noticed it, and look at something else less interesting to you", or "If you want to buy an item, only bring it up as if the item was not worth of mentioning!" Certainly, the bargaining process could be fun for the enthusiastic buyers, and, in other words, don't show your excitement too soon!

The old Chinese saying "Know yourself first, and know your enemy." has its wisdom. But after many years' buying in China, I would substitute the word of "enemy" for "friends".

Of many years in practice, I have also learned a special skill in identifying items with a pure sense of good guess. During those days, many of the warehouses were without good lighting. My agent and I sometimes had to identify items according to their approximate shapes and looks, often without seeing the whole picture or a clear picture of the item. Our cognition jumped out in the dark, and determined within seconds, which pieces were worth of purchasing. Of course, sometimes we did pay our tuition.

I particularly recalled several memorable events below in this type of survival acts.

3. The people

One happened in a sheep stall somewhere outside of Beijing. I could no longer remember the name of the small town or the location. It was very cold in the winter in Beijing. There was no heating facility other than a tiny coal stove sparked with small fire that a shepherd kept close by his feet and used while watching his sheep and slept at the stall at night.

I did not have proper warm clothes on as I came from California and had been born and raised in Taiwan until my adult life. I had no good sense of cold weather. It was definitely way more than freezing. I remember the loud and shrilling sound of the cold winds and how badly I wanted to be inside of something else warmer, anything! Whatever I bought I don't remember. I vaguely remembered a small amount of furniture piled up on a cold brick floor, somewhere outside of Beijing, inside a hut with no door, where the shepherd and the sheep shared and slept at night.

I remember shivering in the cold and seeing some lighted clouds in the backdrop of the sky behind this little hut. I was shifted by this cold weather, this circumstance, this shepherd, his sheep, me, being nowhere in the world, and then, there was this time and this space. This little shift I had felt inside me with no name to label has stayed with me until today.

Another time was when my agent told me that one of our suppliers, someone we considered an easy and honest person to deal with, had just lost his wife to sickness and that he was not doing well. I remember this particular purveyor who lived off the beaten path. It was hard to get to his place. Plus we had to use his neighbor's restroom where it was not always convenient. But we always went to his place, knowing he had always got a few special things, and his prices were always good.

His home was nice and simply decorated with a contemporary flare, using some of the old items he was selling. His wife was a kind woman. She was very beautiful. We were told that she once was the number one beauty in the village. They were such a loving couple to each other and with such a gentle nature. They were both in the thirties, so it was a shock to hear his young wife had passed away so soon and left him with their baby. I was told that he had lost his mind and could no longer work. His brother tried to help him to sell a few things to maintain his living, and a few of his workers had hung around to produce a few items they had always done and knew how to. But he barely kept a business functioning.

I wanted to order or buy something from him. I hated the idea that his business might vanish or that he might eventually vanish, because he was such a nice person. But since no one knew the status of his business and that it seemed appropriate that he be left with his own family to do whatever they needed to do to help him. Up until today I have no idea what had happened to him afterwards and I doubt if my agent has bought or sent any merchandise from him recently. In the recent years I have made fewer trips to China and purchase what seems convenient. I can't be so sure in a few years if I will still be thinking of him. Somewhere and sometime in life, our experiences with the world changed.

Recently, at the end of each working day, I often asked myself the same question, if there was something good I felt about my work that day. The answer is often yes, as I watch a showroom of furniture in an early morning light slowly awaken from the night before.

The Time and the Market

During the early 1990's I began to travel extensively in China, after already having made many small buying trips, searching for the most exquisite antiques in Chinese home furnishing to fill the ever-increasing trade show orders for famous catalogs and many retail and antique stores across the United States.

Traveling on the back roads of China at that time was not as convenient as it is today. Often one would not know the resources of these novelty items even in the bigger cities such as Shanghai and Beijing. Through layers of friends' friends and their relatives, I was lead to some of the local hidden treasures sold by the individuals all of whom were antique dealers.

For a number of years I did purchase extensively in Beijing and Shanghai, the two largest cities that were ranked among the top like the special economic zone Shen-Zheng. My agent and I had also stormed through many other places in China besides these two big cities, in order to find merchandise competitive to the other American-made and the foreign-made merchandise from around the world on the wholesale market.



One from a pair of early 20th Century tea tables with an ice-ray pattern.

17" w x 14" d x 33" h

Fewer restrictions were placed by the Chinese government then for exporting antique Chinese furnishing out of China, as long as the taxes for the export items were paid and the items were examined. Most of the provincial furniture items, though they were antiques, they were commonly used as ordinary household items at people's homes, and many were not considered precious relics by the Chinese government at that time. These items were available in huge quantities, giving China's geographical size, population, and the length of its history.

These provincial style antique Chinese home furnishing items were considered novelty items on the US market, as people were drawn to the exquisite designs, the colors, the variety of the wood, and their unique functions as home furnishing and life-style items,

which often differ from the western concepts. These objects offered Americans who were interested in Chinese culture life-time aesthetics and beauty. They also offered a wealth of information for studying Chinese culture without traveling to China.

From the early 1990's to approximately 1996, these were the golden years of the provincial antique Chinese home furnishing being available on the US market, as sources were plentiful and China's policy and the need for economic growth welcomed the foreign home furnishing buyers in every way.

Giving the diversity of China's geographical and cultural complexity, it was not unusual that one could purchase an antique bride's chair from an established San Francisco based fine gift and home furnishing catalog with orders filled with some or many similar pieces without repeating itself in patterns and carvings. Or one might find at a fine gift or antique shop an exquisite late 19th century tea table with a cracked-ice or an ice-ray latticework pattern and made of southern Chinese elm with an inlay of a delicate rosewood panel on the top. Many of these antique items were readily available then and in fine condition, if top dollars were paid to request for the finest examples.



An early 19th Century bride's chair with a rare lamp-hanger shaped back-rest, and a replaced wood seat, refinished in dark color.
16.5"w x 12"d x 28"h

Many of these finest examples, if not have already been purchased and included in some of the finest collections or homes in the West, are not easily accessible and available today to the western buyers. This is because, in the recent years, these items, especially the finest ones, have continuously been purchased by the China's own domestic private collections which have abound by more than thousands in the recent years. China's miracle and success in its economic growth within these last twenty years has created many millionaires and higher-income individuals with strong buying power along the coastal cities and special-interest economic areas.

A western collector might come to a realization that the saying of "Good antiques don't last long" is universal even for a country geographically as big and culturally as rich, diverse, and rooted as China. For Americans with large amount of population who favor antiques and antique shopping as fun leisure activity and for many with the fascination

and enthusiasm for Chinese and other Asian art in general, may start to come to a realization that we have been very blessed as a country.

During these last twenty years or so, with the relatively affordable market prices and with the availability on many items for imports, Chinese home furnishings and antique home furnishings have made their journeys to many of the middle class and the upper class American homes. Pieces of Chinese culture and history were presented in the most materialized and most direct way into American's life along with other necessity and non-necessity imports.^{1,2}

From the mid to the late 1990's, huge quantities of antique Chinese furniture pieces of the similar types were purchased and reconditioned to ship to Europe, and some to the United States. Many of these items were extensively restored, re-constructed, and repainted in bright blue, green, yellow, red, black, and even the white color, to be sold price-comparatively in the large supermarkets in Europe as mass style merchandise and for short shelf life.

Many varieties were sought from all areas in China in large quantities, disregarded their conditions, in order to fill the containers after containers. These furniture pieces with the repainted colors headed the traditional Chinese furniture into the popular demand in the reproduced style Chinese home furnishing. By that time, many small and large wood-refinishing factories had already been established in the more popular furniture shopping areas to operate day and night to accommodate large orders of several containers being shipped out on the weekly schedule.

During this period of time, the western market was filled with the antique, the heavily re-constructed, and the reproduced style of newly-made Chinese home furnishings. The value of the individual items compared to each other was very confusing for the western consumers. At the worst time of the market during these years, one might see a large size antique Hong-Chu armoire from the Ningbo area advertised for sale for \$295 in the US domestic market. Some western collectors called this cabinet "the Red Sun". An antique grain measure could cost only \$19 on the US wholesale market in a trade show, among others. Today, a good Hong-Chu cabinet with an original red lacquer in fine condition and its large size circular-shaped old brass plates is hardly available.³

¹ During the Chinese Ming Dynasty in the 17th century, famous Chinese scholar Wen Zhen Hen (文震亨) wrote a fine literature "Zhang Wu Zhi (長物志)" ("Treatise on Superfluous Things") that explained this concept of materialized fine culture to the best. This book provides a wealth of information in the practical function and the spiritual aspect of the Chinese furnishings, including furniture and decorative items, in their home environment in the literati style. This book was designated as one of the "Four Complete Books Collected by the Government" (pronounced as "Su Ku Chuan Shu 四庫全書") during the Chinese Ching Dynasty.

² For the history of Chinese Imports in the United States since the 18th century, please refer to an article "Chinese Imports", written by Ms. Mildred Jailer-Chamberlain, published in *Antiques & Collecting Magazine* January 2005.

³ The finest and the most complete collection in Ningbo style antique Chinese home furnishing can be found in a private museum in Ningbo. This museum is owned by Mr. He Xiao Dao (何曉道), the author of "Red Dowry (紅妝)" and "Ten Mile Red Dowry (十里紅妝)", first books published in Chinese for the Ningbo style antique Chinese home furnishing with red lacquer finish.



Pair of Hong Chu cabinets - A pair of 19th Century Ningbo style Hong-Chu clothing armoires in its fine original condition, with 21" diameter old center brass plates and an original, unfinished fine red lacquer finish. (44"w x 24.25"d x 72.75"h)

*This possibly is the only pair exists with this size of the original plates.

My agent and I purchased a few pieces of these re-painted and heavily re-constructed furniture pieces for my business, in order for me to be competitive on the wholesale market with the variety and the price. But soon I dropped out of selling this type of furniture in mass quantity. All in all, I eventually dropped out of the wholesale market where I needed to find and export out of China mass amount of merchandise with similarities to fill multiple orders from the trade shows. It was difficult to do considering the diverse differences in antiques. Neither did I feel this was my path.

What I did not know was that, when I took a curve, a turn, a small twist, at a fork of life, without knowing the direction I was heading for, that another path has already been set for me. Riding with the waves rather than dropping out of the water entirely also allowed me with more sensitivity and new knowledge to things and path that I thought I once knew.

Provincial style antique Chinese home furnishing as an export item from China to the US market has gone a long way. It can be divided approximately into four different stages below.

1. From the late 1980's to the early 1990's-"The More Antique Time"
2. From the early 1990's to the late mid-1990's-"The Golden Age of the Provincial Antique Chinese Home Furnishing on the US market"
3. From 1998 to the early 2000's-"The Not-So-Pure as Antiques Period" when the heavily restructured and the reproduced antique style Chinese home furnishings flooded the western market

4. The Present Time-with the strong demand in both the domestic Chinese market and the western market for the finest in the authentic and rare antique pieces, the reproduced style, the newly-made, and the re-designed Chinese home furnishings continue to flourish the US market.

Today it's rather common to see Chinese furniture or decorative items included in the photos of many western interior or home decorating magazines. Many more articles about provincial antique Chinese home furnishing or study of antique Chinese furniture have also been published both in China and in the United States in the recent years.⁴

The Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts has recently imported and transplanted an entire old Chinese residence to the United States, presenting the Chinese architecture and the home living environment of China to the American public. We must applaud the curator and the museum's expert team. They had the foresight and the courage, despite the competitive market environment, giving that the antique Chinese home furnishing items are still available in relatively large quantities, compared to other more established items such as fine Chinese porcelains and paintings one might see in museums and top auction houses. With much fewer articles published on the subject of the Provincial Style Antique Chinese Home Furnishing and wood work, its styles, usage, links, and origin, compared to the other traditional style Chinese furniture and antiques, we have only seen the light begin to shape at the other side of the tunnel.⁵



Huanghuali wood table - Detail of a perfectly made Huanghuali hardwood table.

*Huanghuali wood ranks among the three most exotic Chinese hardwood. For the Classical Style Chinese furniture pieces made of Huanghuali wood, please see all the major museums that house a Classical Chinese Furniture collection.

⁴ For reference in English, one may go online and type in Chinese furniture for books. List of new books and links are available.

⁵ To view an old Chinese residence and a 17th century Chinese garden on-line, please check out www.pem.org/sites/yinyutang and www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/78870

The End

At our first sight
We see no future of the houses and the people.
Dark water swirled underneath the shallow sky,
Slow clouds mingled with the filtered lights.

It is as if you and I have not met.
Spring is young and the grasses are green
When past, present, and future
Play like fingers among strings.

I remember a dream
Filled with furniture asleep,
Our hearts beat like birds
Like the sky, the earth, and everything that remains.

*All photos courtesy of Shen's Gallery & Imports, Inc.