

Small Portable Treasures

Examples of Classic Chinese Furniture: (V)

Grace Wu Bruce

The numerous and versatile wooden objects produced during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) included many small boxes and stands of various designs and functions. Surviving examples of these pieces, many of them superbly crafted, are mainly made of tropical hardwoods such as *huanghuali*, *zitan* and *jichimu*. They have been classed as document boxes, seal chests, writing boxes, book rests etc. and the elegant name of 'objects from the scholar's studio' has been conferred on the whole category. These twentieth century attributions may have their origin in the assumption by some modern scholars of the preference for plain wooden furniture, especially those made of precious hardwoods, by the literati class of the Ming dynasty.

During the past few years, Ming furniture has come into its own as a focus of scholarly and collecting attention and whilst the emphasis is on full size furniture pieces, the consequent advent of a large body of fresh material on the market has also offered many examples of smaller scale treasures, making possible a more systematic examination of their types, designs and functions.

One of the more extraordinary designs in a truncated T-form is illustrated in Fig. 1. This box is made in highly figured *huanghuali* wood and measures 80 cm at its widest, 13.7 cm



Fig 1. A *huanghuali* sedan chair box. Ming dynasty. Width 80 cm. Depth 17.8 cm. Height 13.7 cm.



Fig 2. The components in the interior of the sedan chair box in Fig 1.

high and 17.8 cm deep. Its shape is a long rectangle with a square section cut out from both ends at the bottom. This extraordinary feature is to enable the box to be placed on the poles of a sedan chair. The present example is completely plain, except for the beaded edges where the lid

meets the body of the box. All the corners are reinforced with *huangtong* (yellow brass) bands and *ruyi* (cloud) shaped corners are applied on the top. A square *huangtong* plate in front has a *ruyi* shaped hasp with openings the poles of a sedan chair. The present example is completely plain, except for the beaded edges where the lid



Fig 3. A *sancai* miniature pottery model of a sedan chair complete with box, dimensions not available. Ming dynasty.

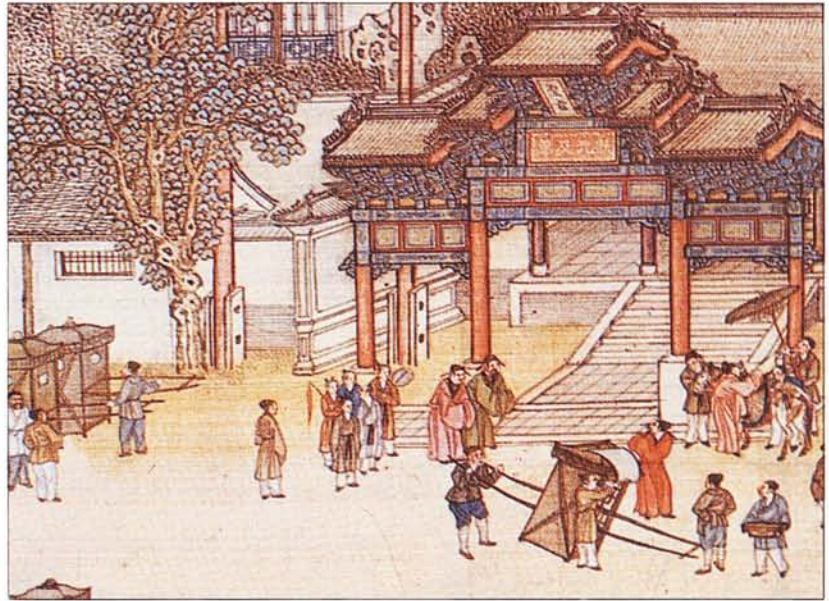


Fig 4. Qing Ming Shanghe Tu (detail), **Spring Festival on the River**. A Qing (1736) copy of the Song original after **A City of Cathay**, National Palace Museum, Taipei. 1980, plate 26 (scroll section VIII).

complete the brassware on this piece. The lid opens to reveal a removable tray, two small hidden compartments at the ends with flap-doors and a deep storage section in the centre (Fig. 2).

The miniature pottery model in Fig. 3 shows a box of similar design hung at the entrance of a sedan chair, the front facing outward. Miniature pottery tomb furniture were buried to accompany the dead into the afterlife. The extensive number of pieces that have emerged into the art market generally reflect their large scale originals quite faithfully.

The eminent Beijing art historian Wang Shixiang brought to my attention a pictorial reference showing a sedan chair box. In the famous handscroll **Spring Festival on the River** (*Qingming Shanghe Tu*), first painted by the Northern Song (960-1127) artist Zhang Zeduan, a farewell scene in front of the imposing residence of a *zhuangyuan*, the highest ranking graduate of the civil exams, showed people about to mount their horses or enter sedan chairs (Fig. 4). The man in red is lifting his hands in a gesture of farewell as he approaches



Fig 5. Two rectangular *huanghuali* boxes of the Ming dynasty.

the sedan chair, tipped forward with the curtain lifted, waiting for him to enter. On the right is the sedan chair bearer and an attendant holding a sedan chair box, to be put in place after the man in red has entered.

The size and design of sedan chair boxes are by and large quite standard with only minor variations in the metalware. Sometimes, no metal reinforcements were used at the corners, or, the central metal plate could be round or shaped like

a lotus flower. These metal parts may be inlaid or surface-mounted and are sometimes of *be baitong*, an alloy made of cooper, zinc and nickel with a touch of iron. *Baitong* is often found on large scale Ming hardwood furniture.

Sedan chair boxes were made in materials other than *huanghuali*, e.g. *zitan*¹, another tropical hardwood. A lacquer piece dated to the 17th century in the Royal Ontario Museum² is inlaid with bone and decorated

with landscapes and figures. Sir Harry Gardner mentioned other mother-of-pearl and painted lacquer boxes with this unique shape although he was unaware of their function³.

The most common type of Ming boxes are the rectangular shaped ones in Fig. 5, consisting of a lid, body and removable tray within. Mostly completely plain with or without beaded edges where the lid meets the body, these boxes vary in size from tiny examples as on the left in Fig. 5 (width 10 cm, depth 9.5 cm and height 7.2 cm) to sizes large enough for the storage of painting scrolls⁴. The middle size box in Fig. 5 measures 42.4 cm wide, 22 cm deep and 18.2 cm high. They invariably have rectangular metal strap-hinges, a round or square central plate and almost always, handles on both sides, either angular or loop-shaped. Sometimes there are metal reinforcements at the corners.

This classical design was also adopted by Ming dynasty craftsmen to make large storage chests for clothing⁵, of which many Qing (1644-1911) provincial pieces made in *zamu*, miscellaneous types of wood, have survived.

The appearance of these boxes may be drastically changed by their metal application despite the same basic design. The large square *huangtong* plate in the centre of the box in Fig. 6 as well as the thick corner reinforcements and the heavy handles give this piece a "heavy-duty" appearance in contrast to the perfectly proportioned pieces in Fig. 5, a type which has been named writing boxes by modern scholars probably due to their elegant appearance. In reality, these boxes were probably used to store many different things.

There is an illustration from *The Golden Lotus* (*Jin Ping Mei*)⁶, a 16th century novel by an anonymous author. Ximen Qing, the chief pro-



Fig 6. "Heavy-duty" *huanghuali* storage box. Width 38 cm. Height 15.5 cm.



Fig 7. An illustration to the novel *The Golden Lotus*, (*Jin Ping Mei*). Published Ming dynasty, Chongzhen period (1628 - 1643). After Jin Ping Mei Cihua, vol. 1.

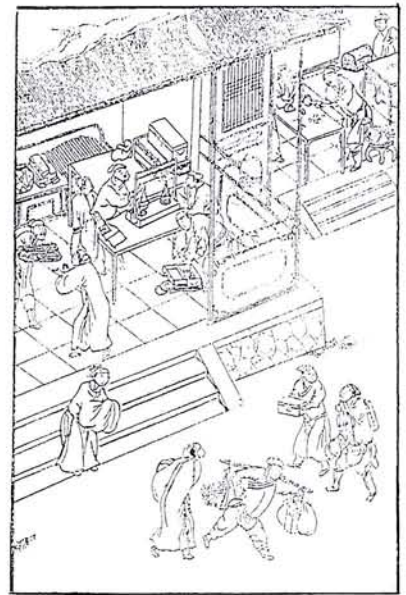


Fig 8. Illustration to the historical novel *Outlaws of the Marsh* (*Shui Hu Zhuan*),. Published Wanli period (1573 - 1619). After Zheng Zhenduo 1988, vol 2, p.864.

tagonist in the novel, had dispatched his servants and hired hands to move the worldly goods of the wealthy widow Meng Yu Lou to his house, in preparation to receive her as a concubine.

The scene portrayed showed seven boxes of our classical design in various sizes, from one equal to our medium size one in Fig. 5 to one large enough for the storage of clothes. The contents of these boxes

might be deduced from what the matchmaker Xue told Ximen Qing about Meng.

"The widow of the cloth merchant Yang residing outside the south gate is quite wealthy. Even the alcove beds from Nanjing, (she owns) two. Clothes for all four seasons, brocades and robes, she has many. (She also) has four or five boxes of strings of pearls; not to mention earrings, gold brooches with



Fig 9. A *zitan* dressing case. Ming dynasty.
Width 40 cm. Depth 35.5 cm. Height 32.5 cm.

Fig 10. The interior tray-like compartment of the dressing case in Fig 9.

Fig 11. The drawers behind the doors of the dressing case in Fig 9.



Fig 12. Illustration to the drama **The West Chamber**, (*Xi Xiang Ji*). Published by Jiaoshantang, Ming dynasty. Wanli period (1573 - 1619). After Fu Xihua, vol 1, p.107.



Fig 13. Illustration to **The West Chamber**. Published by Shijiantang, Ming dynasty. Wanli period (1573 - 1619). After Fu Xihua, vol 1, p.472.

precious gems, gold and silver bracelets. Even cash in hand, she has over a thousand ounces and finely weaved cloths, two or three hundred bales...¹⁷

These boxes would seem to contain among other things, the jewelry, cash and clothings of the lady Meng.

That these boxes were used for the storage of valuables and cash is again demonstrated in another illustration from the popular late Ming historical novel, **Outlaws of the Marsh**, *Shui Hu Zhuan*⁸. The rebel heroes at Liang Shan Bo are seen dividing their spoils, gold and other valuables after they decided to disband.

Most extant examples of these boxes are completely plain, decorated only either metalware *baitong* or *huangtong*. A few carved pieces have appeared during the last few years but those examined by this author were all dated to the Qing dynasty or later.

Another type of storage box, one that is more intricately designed, is illustrated by the exquisite example in Fig. 9. It consists of a lid which opens to reveal a tray-like compartment (Fig. 10) and two doors behind which are three drawers (Fig. 11) and is constructed more like a small cabinet than a box. The base is beautifully shaped and carved with tendrils in relief. It measures 40 cm wide, 35.5 cm deep, 32.5 cm high and is made in, the most valuable tropical hardwood (*zitan*). The *baitong* metalware consists of corner reinforcements for the lid, *ruyi* shaped corner pieces on the top, strap-hinges for the lid and the doors, a beautifully shaped plate with a hasp and lock receptacles, small rectangular plates with door pulls and rectangular handles on both sides.

This type of table cabinet has been frequently referred to as a seal chest, although no evidence of such usage has ever been offered. This

name may have its origin in the publications of the 1970s and early 80s⁹ as earlier books have referred to similar examples as dressing cases¹⁰ and medicine boxes¹¹.

Wang Shixiang has put forth a convincing case that these small table cabinets were used on dressing tables¹². According to him, seal chests are usually square, with a canted cover, with the shape of a seal usually square with a smaller knob-handle at the top, and they have no doors or panels in front. Many were lacquered and decorated with inlaid gold, mother of pearl, carving or other techniques. Ming examples are found in Japanese collections¹³.

On examination of over six thousand woodblock print book illustrations dated to the late Ming and early Qing, very few of these cases were found. There were two however, from different editions of the popular drama *The West Chamber* (*Xi Xiang Ji*), which illustrated a case answering to our description.¹⁴

The text description tells us that Cui Ying Ying has discovered a secret message hidden by her maid in her dressing case. Here she is standing next to her dressing case, a piece of similar design to Fig. 9, reading the message. Cui is shown reading next to a large table with an inkstone and the type of small cabinet we are discussing. A casual viewer might easily be misled into assuming that this scene portrayed a scholar at his desk with an inkstone and perhaps a "seal chest" when in fact the exact same scenes are illustrated. The illustration is actually titled *Secret Reading of a Letter at the Dressing Table* (*Zhunag Tai Kui Jian*).

Most of the surviving examples of Ming dressing cases are made of *huanghuali*, with *zitan* pieces being quite rare. Many are completely plain, with a flat or canted top, decorated only by their metalware and the beautifully figured wood employed in



Fig 14. A *huanghuali* dressing case with carved doors, Ming dynasty. Width 39.1 cm. Depth 32.1 cm. Height 37 cm.

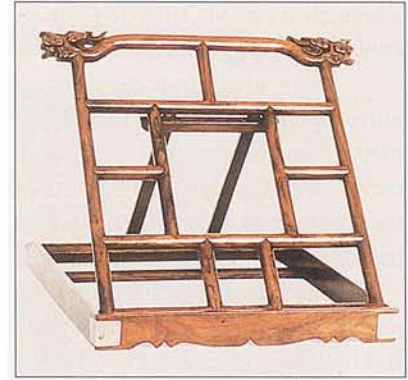


Fig 15. A *huanghuali* mirror stand, Ming dynasty. Width 46.2 cm. Depth 43.3 cm. Height 35.5 cm.

their construction. The metal work may be of *baitong* or *huangtong* and come in many different designs and shapes. It is interesting to note that as with the rectangular storage boxes, these dressing cases invariably have handles on their sides.

An extremely rare *huanghuali* dressing case, its doors carved with figures in high relief, is illustrated in Fig. 14. It is slightly smaller than the *zitan* piece in Fig. 9, and measures 39.1 cm wide, 32.1 cm deep and 37 cm high. The metal work, shaped and engraved, is made of gilt bronze. Other decorated dressing cases are known¹⁵ but none with a motif of figures and pavilions.

Related examples of dressing cases in carved red lacquer are known, one in the Lee Family Collection¹⁶ and another in London, published in *Chinese Lacquer* from the Jean-Pierre Dubosc Collection and others¹⁷. Both are dated to Jiajing (1522-1566), highly ornamented and both have gilt bronze metal work.

Another wooden piece often found on the dressing table is the mirror stand. The exquisite *huanghuali* example in Fig. 15 is quite large, measuring 46.2 cm wide, 43.3 cm deep and when extended as shown, it stands 35.5 cm high. Both the lat-

tice panel, top rail has *lingzhi* ends and the back support both have extended dowels that fit into sockets in the base frame, allowing them to operate on a hinge mechanism and collapse flat when not in use. Not shown in Fig. 15 is a removable lotus leaf shaped support where the mirror would rest. (see Fig. 17 for a similar support).

Such a mirror stand is seen on the table next to the lavishly festooned six post canopy bed in an illustration from the early Qing drama *Zhan Hua Kui*¹⁸ which used late Ming illustrations of the



Fig 12. Illustration to the drama *Zhan Hua Kui*. Published Ming dynasty. Zhongzhen period (1628 - 1643). After Fu Xihua, vol 2, p.27.

Zhongzhen period (1628-1643) in its compilation.

More glamorous versions of mirror stands incorporate the folding parts, often decorated with openwork carved panels, with a lower section of one or several drawers, sometimes behind doors.

The mirror case in Fig. 17 is made of beautifully figured *huanghuali* and has *baitong* corner reinforcements, door pull, plate and a locking device on the drawer front. The actual mirror stand is divided into a central section carved out in quarter lobe form, inset panels on the sides with openwork dragons and a lotus leaf shaped piece fitted into the bottom to support a mirror. (Fig. 18)

Both mirror stand and mirror case are recorded in the fifteen century carpenters' manual, *Secret Reading of a Letter at the Dressing Table* (*Lu Ban Jingjiang Jiajing*). Under the same heading is listed "mirror stand and mirror box," noting that they vary in size..., have two layers of drawers and if the stand is carved, there may be two phoenixes facing the sun, an ancient cash coin in the middle, scrolling tendrils and flowers on the sides, (and) a lotus support at the bottom..."¹⁹

There are other examples of more elaborate and less portable pieces of furniture to support mirrors. They are constructed like small cabinets with many drawers at the base and a three, five or seven panelled screen fitted at the top surrounding the mirror which leans against them. There is an elaborately carved example in the Honolulu Academy of Arts in *huanghuali*²⁰ and a similar piece is also illustrated in the Wanli (1573-1619) edition of the *Lu Ban Jing*²¹.

Another type of portable furniture recorded in the *Lu Ban Jing* is the carry-box which is listed under two headings, that of large rectangular carrying-box²² and food box²³. The description for the design and

construction of both is very similar, the only variation being their size. Fig. 19 illustrates a superb example made in *huanghuali*. It consists of a stand in the form of a rectangular frame with two uprights connected by a handle. There are curved spandrels on the sides of the uprights.

The box itself has two tiers and a lid, the bottom tier resting on a ledge recessed into the stand. There are beaded edges where the layers meet, a practical feature which strengthens the box. Holes are punched on the sides of the lid and the uprights meet so that a long thin metal rail may pass



Fig 17. A *huanghuali* mirror case, Ming dynasty.

Width 35.7 cm. Depth 35.8 cm. Height 15.5 cm.

Fig 18. The *huanghuali* mirror case in Fig 17 with the mirror stand extended.



Fig 19. A *huanghuali* two-tier carry-box. Ming dynasty.

Width 36.5 cm. Depth 20 cm. Height 21.5 cm.

Fig 20. The various components of the two-tier *huanghuali* carry-box in Fig 19.

through to stabilize the whole structure, making certain that the lid will not fall off even when the carry-box is tipped. A small hole at the end of the rail for a lock completes the ingenious locking mechanism. *Huangtong* reinforcements are inlaid into the connecting joints of the stand and the lid. Its various components are shown in Fig. 20.

Extant examples of carry-boxes made in precious hardwoods vary in size as well as the number of tiers. Most are completely plain. Decorated examples are rare. The exquisite piece in Fig. 21 is inlaid with coiled dragons made in *huangyang*, (boxwood). Other pieces made in *tihong* (carved red lacquer) as well as inlaid with precious stones, are known to exist.²⁴

Since the Song dynasty (960-1279), this type of box was already in use, mainly as a container for food and wine. Pictorial evidence however, suggested that many of them were made of bamboo.²⁵

In the scroll painting *Returning Late From a Spring Outing* (*Chun You Wan Gui*),²⁶ by the Ming artist Qiu Ying (1494-1552), a three-tier carry-box is shown (Fig. 22). A horseman returns from an outing followed by his attendants, one carrying a lute while the other balances a three-tiered carry-box, a wine jar and other necessities for the outing on his shoulders.

An illustration from the drama *Poetry and Verse Alliance* (*Shi Fu Meng*), published during the Chongzhen period, portrayed a scene of farewell. Two servants carrying on their shoulders a large four tiered carry-box alight from a boat, followed by another carrying a jar. The contents of these containers might be guessed at from the title of the illustration *Jian Bie*²⁷, (*Saying Farewell with Food and Wine*).

That these boxes with tiers were also used for containing objects



Fig 21. A rare two-tier carry-box decorated with inlaid boxwood. Ming dynasty. Width 35.5 cm. Depth 20 cm. Height 24 cm.



Fig 22. *Returning Late from a Spring Outing*, (*Chun You Wan Gui*), (detail). Qiu Ying (1494-1552)
Hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk. 145.5 cm x 76.5 cm
After An exhibition of Works by Chiu Ying, P.7.

other than food and wine was certain. A giant size carry-box can be seen in the scene from the *Golden Lotus* portrayed the concubines of Ximen Qing dressing up his young son Guange.

We know from the text that the giant box of gifts from the Taoist temple contained various types of food including vegetarian dumplings, cakes, fruits and wine that "filled four

tables" as well as a complete Taoist outfit for Guange. "A black and green headdress made of silk and gold, a black silk Taoist robe, a green silk inner robe, a pair of white socks and a pair of shoes..."²⁸

How versatile boxes of this design might be can be seen in an illustration from the late Ming pictorial encyclopedia, *Sancai Tuhui*.²⁹ Here there is a *tilu tusbi* diagram of a port-

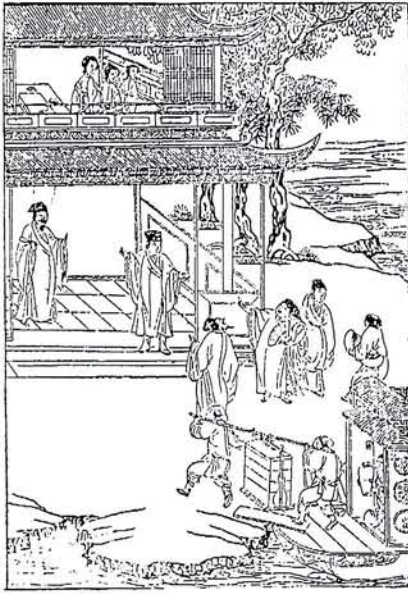


Fig 23. An illustration to the drama **Peotry and Verse Alliance**, (*Shi Fu Meng*). Published Chongzhen period (1628 - 1642). After Fu Xihua, vol 2, p.807.



Fig 24. An illustration to the novel **The Golden Lotus**, (*Jin Ping Mei*). Published Ming dynasty. Chongzhen period (1628 - 1642). After Jin Pin Mei Cihua, vol 1.

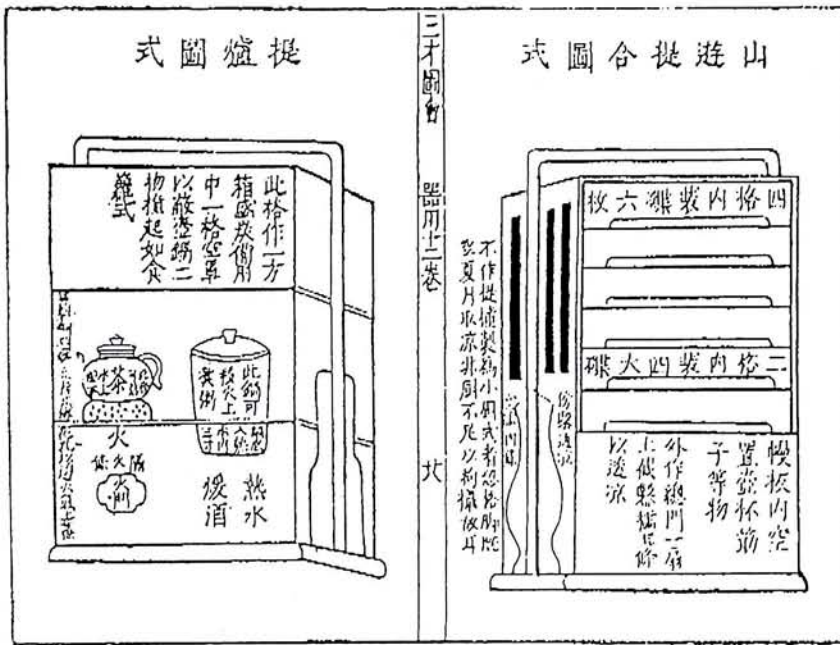


Fig 25. An illustration from **Sancai Tuhui**. Ming dynasty Pictorial Encyclopedia. After Wang Siyi, vol 2, p. 1337.

able stove. Whilst its outside appearance is identical to a standard carry-box, there are special fittings inside to house a wine warming vessel with a cover that is "also suitable for cooking porridge on an open fire"; a specially made metal teapot on a base

with plum blossom shaped openings for heating tea and a shelf on top for the storage of charcoal.

It is Wang Shixiang's opinion that large and medium size carry-boxes suitable for travelling were made of light weight woods and be-

cause of their fragility, none has survived. The small carry-boxes as in our examples, made in precious hardwoods, of lacquer or inlaid with stones were in his opinion never used for the carriage of food. They were meant for the storage of precious stones, seals, antiques and small treasures³⁰. In this context, the popular name of picnic box attached to these tiered boxes, must now be abandoned.

The name of medicine chest has been given to a type of box whose interior has many drawers. These boxes may have two doors in front as in the exquisite *huanghuali* example in Fig. 26 or a single removable panel, as in the unrestored piece located in China in Fig. 27. They may have handles as in these two examples or they may not. The common denominator seems to be their possession of large number of drawers. The documentary and pictorial evidence for this type is thin. The description of the medicine chest in the *Lu Ban Jing* is of a larger piece of furniture than those often encountered, "measuring two feet by one foot seven"³¹. It also did not seem to have doors or a front panel.

In addition, it was specified that the interiors of the drawers should be made of pine wood and not *zamu*, (miscellaneous woods). In most of the actual examples now called medicine chests, the interiors are made of either hardwood or *zamu*. These apparent contradictions might mean that our examples of "medicine chests" in precious hardwoods were also derivatives of a more common household type of furniture as in the case of our carry-boxes from "picnic" boxes. The metal work on these chests can again be *huangtong* for *baitong*, inlaid or surface-mounted.

After examining many examples of the objects discussed above, one is astonished to discover that they were made to a uniformly high



Fig 26. A *huanghuali* medicine chest with doors and handle.
Width 41.9 cm. Depth 33 cm.
Height 42.5 cm.



Fig 27. An unrestored *huanghuali* medicine chest with the front panel removed.
Width 33.7 cm. Depth 23.5 cm.
Height 32.4 cm.

standard. That they were designed to fulfil mundane practical purposes did not seem to have prevented their makers from fashioning them with great skill and care. The careful choice of timber used to enhance the beauty of a piece, the perfect proportions achieved by the subtle balance of the different parts, the judicious placing metal work, at once functional and decorative, the precise execution of complicated joinery and the masterly carvings employed are all reminiscent of their full size relations, amply demonstrating the genius of the Ming carpenters.

Grace Wu Bruce

NOTES

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