Notes on Two Inlaid Southern Official's Armchairs in the Liang Yi Museum Permanent Collection

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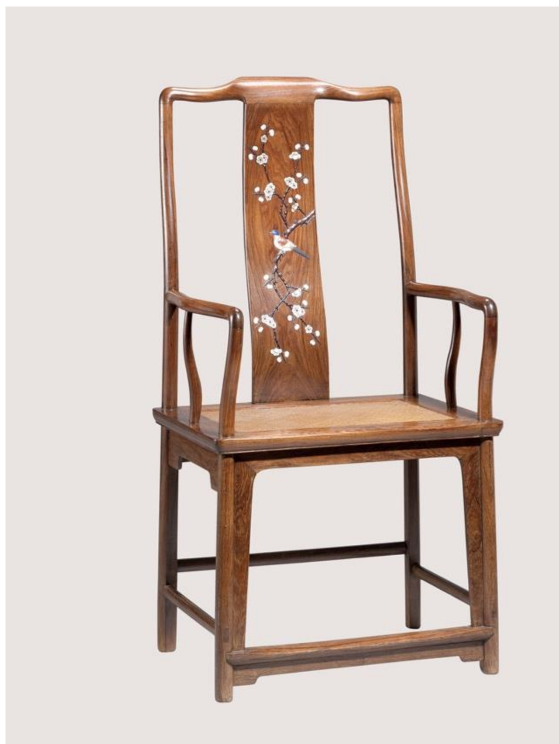
The permanent collection at Liang Yi Museum boasts a pair of southern official's armchairs, made from *huanghuali*, known alternatively as Chinese rosewood, set apart from the rest of the museum's contemporaries by intricately inlaid back splats. Adopting a comparative approach sourced from wider literature, the chronology and social biography of these armchairs will be discussed. From this, it will be argued that the inlaid southern official's armchair is not as rare as previously imagined – that its modern scarcity is caused by circumstances of artefact exodus and destruction, fated by the very same decorative feature that once separated them from other similar armchairs. That being said, this research presents the notion that the inlaid southern official's armchair is a unique typology under the umbrella of Suzhou-style furniture, and is certainly worthy of further research.

Physical Description

Both chairs are each at a height of 121cm, with a seat length and width of 61.5cm and 44cm respectively. Both chairs have similar physical features, including non-protruding, bow-shaped crest rails with headrests, as well as non-protruding arms. With curved side-posts and front-posts to form the armchair shape, these chairs are of the typical Suzhou variety of southern official's armchairs. Both chairs have curved back splats, bearing different bird-and-flower motifs inlaid with various semi-precious stones.



The pair of inlaid southern official's armchairs in the Liang Yi Museum permanent collection.

Methodology

Desk-based research was conducted to seek out comparable examples to the armchairs . This list, possibly the first consolidation of known examples of inlaid southern official's armchairs with bird-and-flower motifs, is detailed below in ascending order of number of chairs:

1) 1 chair in the GuanFu Museum Collection
2) 1 chair in the Haven Collection
3) 1 chair in the Hui Tong Collection
4) 2 chairs in the Liang Yi Museum Permanent Collection
5) 2 chairs in the MQJ/Grace Wu Bruce Collection
6) 2 chairs in the Tseng Riddell Collection
7) 2 chairs in the Liu Yu Zhai Collection
8) 4 chairs in the private collection of Ned Johnson, previously on long-term loan to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts until 2017

The consolidation of wider research has created a sample size from which conclusions about the two armchairs in the Liang Yi Collection can be tentatively drawn and discussed, especially in the areas of chronology and social biography.

Chronology

Comparing the stated date of all the chairs above, an immediate discrepancy is spotted with regards to the date of the two armchairs in the Liang Yi Collection. It is the sole pair to be tentatively dated to the 18th century, which would be the early to mid-Qing dynasty; while all other chairs were dated to the late Ming dynasty. This essay is inclined to argue for an adjustment in chronology of the two armchairs for several reasons. The extreme similarity between the motifs across all samples would point towards a localised creation date and location. It is more likely that the two armchairs within the Liang Yi Collection were made in a similar period than being Qing copies of earlier late-Ming examples. The pomegranate iconography featured on one of the armchairs may also lend credence to this hypothesis. Bartholomew in Wicks 2002 presents the argument that pomegranates as a decorative motif was most popular in the 17th century (late Ming), through overarching art themes such as the hundred-boys. Lastly, it is worth noting that the supply for *huanghuali* – an imported timber from the South East Asian region – experienced a severe shortage by the mid-Qing dynasty. While entirely possible that the chairs were indeed created for very elite consumption in the mid-Qing period (18th century), based on the above, it is argued that the creation date of the two armchairs would more likely be the 17th century, or the Ming-Qing transitional period.

Inlaying and Chaîne Opératoire

The two armchairs bear the same bird-and-flower motif seen today when they were acquired for the Liang Yi Collection, but was inlaid exclusively with colourless mother-of-pearl. The inlay deemed a later inauthentic addition, it was removed and a new inlay with semi-precious stones was designed and fulfilled by jewellery designer Wallace Chan. This presents a debate in regard to the chaîne opératoire of the armchairs, which refers to the

technical development of the armchairs from creation to disposal or, in this case, modern acquisition. From the above, two possible scenarios of development of the armchairs can be inferred:

Armchair 2 with colourless mother-of-pearl inlay prior to restoration by Wallace Chan.

Scenario A:
Phase I: The armchairs were created with the original mother-of-pearl inlay in the 17th century
Phase II: Removal of mother-of-pearl after acquisition, replaced by semi-precious stones in the 21st century

Scenario B:
Phase I: The armchairs were created with an original inlay of unknown materials in the 17th century
Phase II: Removal of inlay materials, replaced by mother-of-pearl at later date
Phase III: Removal of mother-of-pearl after acquisition, replaced by semi-precious stones in the 21st century

Unless more armchairs identical to the two in question are found in remarkable original conditions, it remains difficult to determine immediately if the mother-of-pearl is the original inlay, and what materials were initially used if the mother-of-pearl was not. The current dataset does not contain a chair exclusively inlaid with mother-of-pearl: the closest examples would be the armchairs in the Liu Yu Zhai Collection inlaid with mother-of-pearl,

rhinoceros horn and coconut wood. This is also supported by the wider context of decorative traditions in the late Ming period, specifically the hundred-treasure (*baibaoqian*) inlaying method. Evarts 2000 in the Liang Yi publication *A Leisurely Pursuit* has discussed, in great depth, the rise of this multi-textured inlaying method pioneered by Zhou Zhu in Yangzhou – a subtle form of conspicuous consumption, indicative of wealth and even scholarly taste. All armchairs named above were created with the *baibaoqian* method. Zhang 2011 adds that Suzhou-style furniture rarely utilises shell-inlaying exclusively, instead absorbing it into the *baibaoqian* inlaying technique. From the chronology derived above, the creation date of 17th century (late Ming) would place the chairs in the height of the *baibaoqian* method. This makes it less likely that the two armchairs in question – hefty investments, handcrafted from precious hardwood; would then go against the grain and adopt a contemporarily unorthodox decorative tradition. Therefore, while not ruled out entirely, the rarity of inlaid southern official's armchairs inlaid with only mother-of-pearl in a bird-and-flower motif would suggest it is unlikely that the two armchairs in the Liang Yi Museum, at the time of acquisition, bore original inlays. From the above, it is tentatively concluded that Scenario B is the more plausible of the two.

Adhering to the hypothesis that the mother-of-pearl inlay at the time of acquisition was not original, there are a number of reasons that the original inlay did not survive. Consider the condition of the *huanghuali* armchairs, which are only shaped and polished to highlight the natural beauty and grains of the hardwood – as per typical scholarly traditions at the time. The lack of overall damage and degradation would point to the original inlays being removed or damaged in a localised manner that did not threaten the integrity of the chairs. Three circumstances discussed in-depth in Evarts 2000 could account for the loss of the original inlay within the context of these two armchairs:

<u>Natural Degradation</u>

While it is possible that it has since been removed and cleaned, there is no visible evidence of lacquer having ever been used, in preference of the natural aesthetic of the hardwood. *Eight Discourses of the Art of Living* by Gao Lian, penned in the late 16th century, describes that inlays were embedded and kept in place by lacquer as adhesives. The absence of lacquer on the two armchairs may point to the original inlay falling out naturally as a result of wear and tear, the expansion and contraction of wood over time, or the degradation of original adhesive (without lacquer) through exposure. In the same publication, Gao Lian cites the common phenomenon of hollowed cavities in formerly inlaid furniture due to loosened inlays.

<u>Inflated Monetary Value</u>

The booming economy of the late Ming dynasty, which enabled the consumption of semi-precious materials in the first place, may have also had a hand. Clunas in Berliner *et al.* 1996 describes a late Ming society so endowed by favourable economic development that excessively conspicuous consumption appeared – even contemporary daily dress was accompanied by luxurious materials such as pearls and gems. The demand for semi-precious materials inflated their values, meaning that *baibaoqian* furniture inlays (perhaps already loose from natural wear and tear), were easily removed so that they may be sold for a higher price. Perhaps this was the circumstance in which the original inlay of the two armchairs were removed; and the cavities later filled in with colourless mother-of-pearl to attempt to add value to what were just two plain hardwood armchairs with incomplete inlays.

<u>Imitative Materials</u>

In the same manner that faience was used as an "economical" substitute for lapis lazuli in Ancient Egypt, Evarts 2000 quotes a 17th century Chinese lacquer manual that describes a similar situation. Artificially coloured ceramics emerged in the 17th century to imitate semi-precious inlaying materials. This is perhaps in line with the inflated valuation of semi-precious materials discussed above. It is also likely that this economical practice came to be due to the coinciding popularity of the *baibaoqian* inlaying method at the time. Clunas in Berliner *et al.* 1996 presents the notion that while furniture is consumed in a private sphere, it bears a public function. Items such as these armchairs were created in public workshops, and delivered to the purchaser in public, hence bearing the power to convey the authority and wealth of the purchaser. The use of imitative ceramics in inlays would have been a manufactured perception of social class and wealth. In that case, perhaps the armchairs were originally inlaid with imitative materials, which were later recognised as inferior and removed, replaced by mother-of-pearl, a comparatively more valuable material.

Iconography and Cultural Context

Typical of classical Chinese furniture, the two chairs do not bear any makers' marks, so the provenance of the armchairs remain an issue that will need to be further investigated. That being said, considering the allegorical significance of symbols such as birds and flowers in Chinese decorative arts, it may be possible to suggest some social contexts of the two chairs through a visual analysis of the inlaid iconography. This follows a prior interpretative example conducted on the inlaid southern official's armchair in the Haven Collection.

The back splat of the inlaid southern official's armchair in the Haven Collection has a rebus of a swallow in flight with apricot blossoms, inlaid with the *baibaoqian* method with semi-precious stones and hardwood. Apricot blossoms, which bloom in February, coincide with and is hence associated with passing the imperial examinations. The swallow (*yan)* depicted is also homophonous with banquet (*yan*). The rebus hence has the auspicious meaning of being rewarded by the Emperor with a banquet for excelling in the imperial examinations. From this interpretation, it can be argued that the Haven Collection armchair was part of a collection belonging to a (an aspiring) scholar. The owner of the Haven Collection, a doctor himself, also referred to the allegorical association of the apricot blossom to practicing medicine (*杏林 xin lin).* Therefore, it is also entirely likely that the original owner of the armchair had associations with medicine.

It may be possible for the cultural context of the two armchairs in the Liang Yi Collection to be interpreted in the same manner.

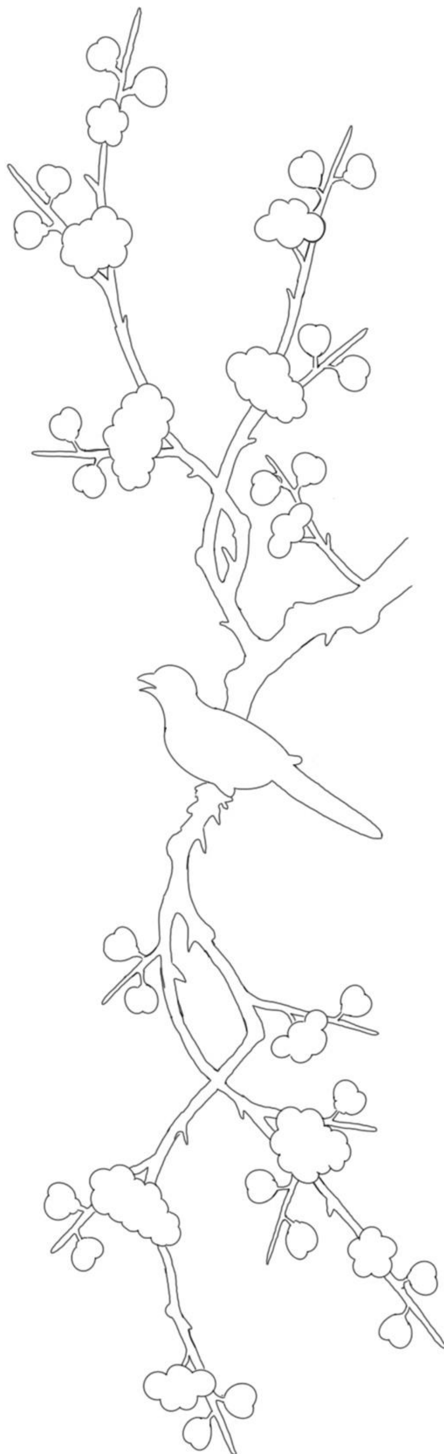
Armchair 1: Bird and Plum Blossoms

The plum blossom is a popular motif in Chinese, Korean and Japanese decorative arts. It is revered by Confucian scholars as it is the first flower to bloom during late winter: it alludes to perseverance in difficult circumstances. Along with the orchid, chrysanthemum and bamboo, the plum blossom (*mei)* forms the traditional Four Gentlemen, allegorical of the virtues that a male scholar should strive to embody. Beyond that, the flower can embody conventionally feminine ideals – the short lifespan of the blossom's bloom has been interpreted as symbolic of the transient nature of female beauty. Wang *et al.* 2017 notes the depiction of a bird in the same rebus as a winter-blooming flower can indicate the impending arrival of spring – hence the image can symbolise the arrival of good news.

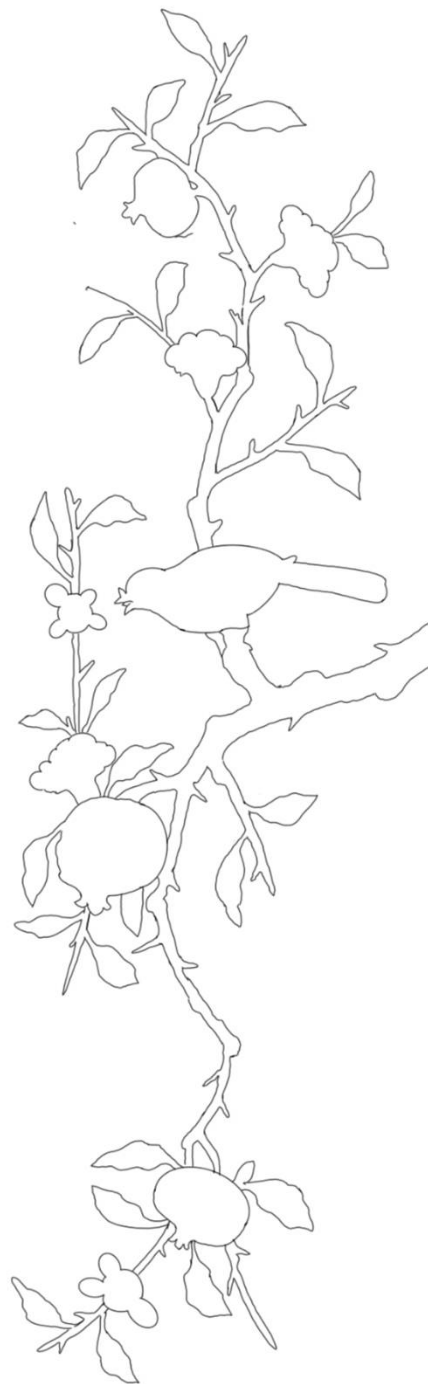
Armchair 2: Bird and Pomegranates

The artistic development of the pomegranate was briefly touched on in earlier sections of this essay. Increasingly common in the 17th century onwards, the pomegranate began to feature as a motif in hundred-boys depictions in two manners. Firstly, with the natural state of the pomegranate as a multi-seed-bearing fruit, it has the immediate connotation of fertility. The pomegranate (*shiliu)* is also homophonous with "generations" (*shi*), bearing symbolism for family growth and inheritance. The inscribed wishes for "descendants as numerous as the seeds of a pomegranate" in *Ode to the Pomegranate and Silk Gourd Vine* painted by Shen Zhou, housed in the Detroit Institute of Art, is a prime example of the above. Within the same hundred-boys motifs, the pomegranate can also be associated with the hopes for an official rank being passed down a family. However, this is only when the pomegranate is associated with the official headdress and belt.

Combining the two motifs, it can be tentatively hypothesised that the pair of motifs convey desires for good news – such as perhaps, the arrival of children. It is important to note that this interpretation is open for re-evaluation and further investigation for several reasons: chief among them being that the motifs examined are an inspired modern restoration of the previously hollowed cavities. If the mother-of-pearl inlays are indeed not the original inlays, then it invites the possibility that the flowers and birds depicted today differ greatly from the original. It should also be made clear that it is unknown whether the pair is a complete set, or part of a much larger set – which would inevitably alter the meanings conveyed in the two armchairs alone. While the allegorical meanings of the inlays remain open for debate, it is without a doubt that the armchairs were commissioned and created in line with the Ming-style of naturalistic, allegorical motifs in the decorative arts and furniture design. Furthermore, the use of inlaying (most likely *baibaoqian*) meant that the armchairs were intended for the enjoyment and consumption of an elite purchaser, familiar with the symbolic traditions in Chinese art. The simplicity in the form of the armchairs, juxtaposed with the simply designed yet expensive inlays create an interesting balance in Ming aesthetics worthy of further research.



Rebus depicting a bird and plum blossoms, as seen on Armchair 1 in the Liang Yi Museum permanent collection (author 2019).



Rebus depicting a bird and pomegranates, as seen on Armchair 2 in the Liang Yi Museum permanent collection (author 2019).

Typological Debate

This initial investigation into the two inlaid southern official's armchairs was based on the consolidation of immediate examples sourced from wider literature. The impressive, non-exhaustive number found thus far – 15 chairs – leads to the writer's belief that these armchairs were not as rare as previously imagined. The wider context of the late Ming dynasty would have certainly facilitated the emergence of this inlaid style of southern official's armchairs.

While Suzhou itself lacked timber, the relaxing of the Ming sea ban (*haijin*) in 1567 allowed the importation of timber to the Yangtze Delta, including hardwoods such as *huanghuali*. With the raw materials for a booming furniture-crafting industry in place, it became possible for craftsman to work for money and sell on the free market, which in turn allowed for increased crafts specialisation and competitive quality in furniture production. Finally, with the Suzhou regional economy and urbanisation booming from the mid-Ming dynasty onwards, demand to furnish increasingly lavish gardens and mansions with high-quality furniture increased. All of the above meant that furniture became increasingly refined and ornate. Therefore, the classical silhouette of the southern official's chair, adorned with the contemporarily popular *baibaoqian* inlay, would not be an impossible scenario at all. This essay is hence inclined to argue that the inlaid southern official's armchair is its own typology, under the umbrella of Suzhou-style furniture; and likely flourished in a highly localised manner in the lower Yangtze Region in the late Ming and early Qing transitional period. It goes further to argue that its inlaid features greatly endangered the preservation of this typology in later circumstances of artefact destruction; accounting for this type of armchair's rarity today.

The issue of artefact destruction and exodus has plagued China on many occasions since the 1830s. Beyond the subsequent lootings of the Opium Wars (1839–1860), Yangzhou was also devastated in the overthrowing of the Qing dynasty. As the originating region of the *baibaoqian* inlaying method, innumerable ornately inlaid objects were destroyed – perhaps including many of these armchairs in question. Second, lax heritage and customs laws in the treaty ports opened after the Opium Wars and the Eight-Power Expedition (1900–1901) also allowed for the rise of the first generation of international collector-dealers who aided in the (legal and illegal) dispersal of Chinese artefacts. This is especially the case with distinctively "Chinese" objects whose decorative features were in line with the Chinoiserie movements at the time – inlaid furniture is a good example.

Locally, the inlaid features of the armchairs would have also carried value in times of economic depression and political instability, such as the 1920s. Semi-precious stones on these armchairs may have been removed and resold; and the bare armchairs, deemed worthless, destroyed.

Liang Yi Museum's *Reunions* catalogue addresses the various modern circumstances in which artefacts were destroyed. This includes the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and the purging of the Four Olds. With inlaying traditions dating back to as early as the Shang Dynasty (c. 1600–1046BC), and mortise-and-tenon-based furniture crafting techniques of a similar chronology; inlaid furniture would have certainly been a target as antiquated symbols and representatives of unequal class consumption. While the traditional craftsmanship of inlaying and furniture construction made the inlaid southern official's

armchair worthy of ancient elite consumption and modern collection alike, they may well have been the culprits of the low preservation status of this type of Suzhou furniture in the modern day.

Concluding Remarks

Through a comparative approach based on visual analysis and literature review, this essay has proposed a reviewed chronology and social biography of the two inlaid southern official's armchairs in the Liang Yi Museum permanent collection. It has also consolidated contemporary examples to propose that said armchair is a unique typology, and has outlined reasons for its rise and downfall. No matter the circumstances of the downfall of the inlaid southern official's armchair, there remains still a significant enough of a sample size worthy of further research; as the chairs uniquely balance the traditional simplicity of Suzhou-style furniture, with the lavishness of *baibaoqian* inlaid decorative art.

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With thanks to Mr. Peter Fung and Ms. Nancy Berliner for personal communication.

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