

## A Study on Ming and Qing Furniture: *Guanpixiang*

The word “*guan*” in *guanpixiang* (literally translated as “table-top chest”) refers to government officials. The name of the chest itself can be somewhat confusing as it implies that these table-top chests were used exclusively by bureaucrats in ancient China to keep official documents. However, other examples of table-top chests suggest otherwise. These chests are often decorated with auspicious themes, indicating that they were also popular among common folk. These chests were also used to keep cosmetics and jewellery.



Table-Top Dressing Chest

18th Century

*Zitan, huanghuali and baitong*

Height 32 x Width 32 x Length 26.5cm

Collection of Liang Yi Museum

Wang Shixiang in his book *Ming-style Furniture Research* posits that a mirror box excavated from a Song dynasty tomb in southern China, constructed with a top lid, drawers at the bottom and a mirror support hinged with pivots and fitted with adjustable angle, is possibly the predecessor of *guanpixiang*. The canonical text of furniture-making, *Mirror of Craftsmanship and Guidelines* by Lu Ban, also suggests that the structure of mirror box is similar to that of table-top chests. Furniture researchers believe that table-top chests evolved from a Song dynasty (960-1279) mirror box prototype. Some existing examples of *guanpixiang*, when the top lid is lifted, reveals a separate, foldable mirror stand. The design facilitates the choosing of jewellery.



*Huangbuali* Dressing Chest

18th Century

*Huangbuali*, brass and *baitong*

Height 37 x Width 34.5 x Length 30.5cm

Collection of Liang Yi Museum



The size and shape of table-top chests are fairly standardised. They are usually undecorated with a flat top lid and a pair of doors that reveals a configuration of drawers; while some are decorated with carvings. As the lid slots into the upper ledges of the two doors, the chest is securely locked when both lid and doors are closed. In some cases, the chest is constructed in a two-door design without a lid; or equipped with hidden compartments to hide treasures.



*Huanghuali* Table-Top Chest

18th Century

*Huanghuali* and brass

Height 38.5 x Width 40 x Length 27cm

Collection of Liang Yi Museum

Table-top chests decorated with auspicious motifs such as *luan* (a type of bird in Chinese mythology), phoenix, flowers and birds are often categorised as part of a woman's dowry. Among the 11 table-top chests housed in the Liang Yi collection, this *huanghuali* table-top chest inlaid with semi-precious stones and ivory is decorated with a "hundred children", a popular theme during the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) which expresses the desire for a large family. The top of the chest is decorated with pomegranate, symbolising fertility. Magpies are decorated on the top of the chest while "Buddha's hand" is on one side of the chest. These motifs signify the wish for offspring and fortune, and if indeed formed part of a woman's dowry, would have been used for storing women's cosmetics and jewellery, rather than men's belongings.



*Huangbuali Dressing Case with Inlaid Decoration*

18th Century

*Huangbuali, tieli wood, mother-of-pearl, agate, coral, ivory and lapis lazuli*

Collection of Liang Yi Museum

The motif of *qilin* - a mythical creature in China with the head of dragon; the tail of ox; the body and hooves of horse - is also commonly seen on Ming and Qing furniture as it is the symbol of fertility and believed to bring a baby to a family. Moreover, it is a compliment to call one's child "*qi-er*" or "*lin-er*" in Chinese culture. Therefore, the *qilin* motif on Chinese furniture can also be interpreted as the wish for a promising future for the next generations.



*Huangbuali Table-Top Chest*

17th Century

*Huanghuali*

Height 32 x Width 34 x Length 23cm

Collection of Liang Yi Museum

