

The best Chinese furniture woods

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One important reason why Ming and early Qing furniture is of such high quality is that it was fashioned from hard, dense woods of good color and beautiful grain. Here we discussed a few main furniture woods: *huanghuali*, *zitan*, *jichi*, *ju*, *tieli*.

Huanghuali wood

During Ming and early Qing dynasties, most of the best furniture was made from *huanghuali* wood. The term *Huanghuali* is not found in early texts, only *huali* was mentioned. Later the prefix *Huang* was affixed to *huali* to distinguish it from the so-called *xinhuali* (new *huali*), the wood that became popular and which is still used in large quantities for making furniture today.

Huali is found in Guangdong and southern lands such as Hainan Island. It is purplish red and has a fragrance very much resembling that of truth-bringing incense. *Huali* with a devil's-face grain is very valuable, while that with a coarse grain and light color is inferior. *Huanghuali* was given the scientific name *Dalbergia hainanensis* (*Hainantan*, or *huali* wood from Hainan Island) as recently as in 1956. In 1980, this name was changed to *Dalbergia odorifera* (*jiangxiang huangtan*) because the reason that this kind of *Dalbergia* is the only one yet known in China in which the colors of the pith and the outer wood are quite distinct. The unevenly colored pith is dark red, even purplish, and often has a black grain, and the outer wood is a grayish-yellow or light yellow. This variation of color is evident on some furniture made from *huanghuali* wood.

Zitan wood

Many ancient books mentioned about *zitan* wood. In these books, *zitan* wood is said to come from various places that are mostly in Indochina, as well as from the Chinese provinces of Yunnan, Guangdong and Guangxi.

Zitan wood belongs to the *Pterocarpus* genus, which itself is a member of the *Leguminosae* family. Within this genus there are about fifteen species, most of which grow in the tropics. *Zitan* wood used in cabinetmaking is rarely found in large pieces and is in fact much closer to rosewood (*Pterocarpus indicus*). From very ancient times, the Chinese have considered *zitan* the most precious wood therefore fewer furniture pieces were made from it than other woods including *huanghuali*. *Zitan* wood is the hardest and heaviest of all hardwoods. Most examples are purplish-black, but some pieces are as black as lacquer, so that the grain is virtually invisible.

Jichi wood

Jichi wood is also known as chicken-wing wood or *qizimu*. There are two kinds of *jichi* wood, an old one and a new one. New *jichi* wood is coarse and purplish-black in color, some of the grain lines being purple, other black. The grain is not very clear, and because it is rigid, straight and coarse, the wood has a tendency to split. Old *jichi* wood is denser and of a purplish-brown color. The grain, especially in straight cuts, forms very good patterns suggesting the feathers near the neck and wings of a bird. After the middle of Qing dynasty few pieces were made from old *jichi* wood while the new *jichi* wood is still being used today.

Jichi is one of the genera of wood belonging to the *Ormosia* family. There are over forty species under the genus, over twenty of which are found in China.

The seeds of the *jichi* tree are called red beans or love beans, and can be made into jewellery. Thus the wood is also called love wood.

Ju wood

Ju wood furniture can be found in towns and villages all over China. *Ju* wood is known in north China as southern elm. It is harder than most woods although it is not exactly a hardwood. It plays an important role in Ming and early Qing furniture. Some pieces were made identical to *huanghuali* wood pieces in form, style and craftsmanship. It is evident therefore that cabinetmakers and true connoisseurs of Chinese furniture greatly valued them, believing that their aesthetic and historical merits should not be downgraded simply because they were made from somewhat inferior wood.

The scientific name of the *ju* genus is *Zelkova*. The species found in Jiangsu and Zhejiang Provinces is a large-leaf elm. Its wood is hard and dense, with a beautiful color and grain suggesting mountains piled upon mountains, called pagoda pattern by Suzhou cabinetmakers.

Tieli wood

Tieli is the largest of all hardwood trees and the timber is the least expensive. In the tropics, *tieli* is used for beams, pillars and screens. In areas such as Guangdong, many very large pieces of furniture are made from it. It is frequently used for the backs of furniture, shelves, and interiors of drawers. The grain of *tieli* wood is similar to that of *jichi* wood, only coarser, and furniture merchants would sometimes pass off *tieli* pieces as being made of *jichi* wood.

The scientific name for *tieli* wood is *Mesua ferrea*. It is a large evergreen with a straight trunk that can be more than 100 feet high, with a diameter of 10 feet. It originally came from the East Indies. The wood is very hard and durable with a dark red center and a fine, beautiful grain.