

The Global Evolution of Chair Design: A Reflection of Cultural and Aesthetic Changes

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Abstract: *Throughout China's history, significant changes and developments have occurred in how chairs are designed and styled as dynasties have changed. These changes are often related to the lifestyle and cultural background of the people at that time. This paper summarizes and analyses chair design styles in the order of ancient Chinese dynasties.*

Keywords: *Chairs design, Chinese culture, ancient China*

1. Introduction

Humans have evolved from ancient apes to today, from crawling to walking upright, from sitting on the ground to the various ways of sitting that have emerged today. The invention and use of chairs have played a revolutionary role. It is an indispensable and essential piece of furniture in human life, thus changing our lifestyle [1]. The evolution of chairs is not only a history of the development of human civilization but also a history of the continuous sublimation of the human pursuit of comfort and aesthetics. The origin of chairs can be traced back to the distant prehistoric era. People in that period mainly used simple materials such as stone, wood, and animal skin to make seats. These primitive seats can only meet basic sitting needs without much comfort and aesthetic considerations. In ancient times, due to the limited level of productivity, chairs were not very popular daily necessities. Most people may still be accustomed to sitting and lying directly on the ground. Only individuals with higher social status or in specific ritual activities would use chairs. However, this primitive form of furniture laid the foundation for the development of chairs.

The history of chair design is long and rich, profoundly reflecting each period's culture, social customs, and artistic pursuits. The history of chairs demonstrates the evolution of furniture design and epitomizes the changes in each culture and society. Due to the different cultural and social discoveries between the East and the West, this paper examines the evolution of chair design in China and other countries and regions separately. It includes ancient China's early bamboo seats and cushions, the later wooden chairs, and the exquisite back chairs, as well as the simple stools of Ancient Egypt, the symbolic seats of Ancient Greece, and the elaborate designs of the Renaissance.

2. Chair Design of Different Dynasties in China

Chinese chair design has gone through many dynasties, reflecting rich cultural backgrounds and social customs. From the cushions and bamboo mats of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou periods to the wooden chairs and back chairs of later generations, the chairs of each era carry people's understanding of life and pursuit of beauty. This section will explore the evolution of Chinese chair design in different historical periods, analyzing its importance in social life, ceremonial culture, and artistic expression, and how it has evolved with the changing times.

During the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, people still maintained the habit of "sitting on the ground". They used mats and banquets woven from bamboo strips as their main seating. These settings were not only skillfully woven but also innovative in design. Some were inlaid with brocade or woven with bamboo strips of different colors, making them both practical and beautiful.

In that era, "sitting" was not only for resting but also a manifestation of etiquette. Especially in the Western Zhou Dynasty, etiquette culture has made important developments. The rulers formulated a strict

five-seat system based on the quality and decorative characteristics of the mats. When using these mats, people would reflect their level of status based on the number of mats. Mats became an important symbol of expressing etiquette and rules in daily life. Whether it was daily life or receiving guests, mats needed to be laid indoors. For example, when the monarch gave food, people had to sit on the mat in the correct position to enjoy it. These etiquette regulations all reflected the importance and respect that society attached to seats at that time.

During the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, the design style of seats underwent significant changes, achieving a harmonious unity of functional and aesthetic functions. During this period, mats were still the main seat, but beds gradually emerged as a new form of seat. The function of the bed was no longer limited to sleeping but expanded to many occasions such as gatherings, meeting friends, and office meetings, showing its diverse functions. Leaning chairs also appeared during the Warring States Period. People could lean on the leaning chairs when sitting on the floor, and people began to pay attention to the comfort of the seats.

At the same time, the lacquering technology that matured in the Shang Dynasty was also widely used in the decoration of furniture such as beds and tables. This technology not only adds a sense of magnificence to the seats, but its gorgeous colors and mysterious and romantic patterns also give the seats a strong artistic atmosphere.

On the cultural level, the ideological concepts during the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period began to change from mysticism to realism, paying more attention to real life and the philosophy of life. This cultural background is reflected in furniture design; that is, the style of seating gradually changed from mysterious and heavy to rational and aesthetic. The decorative features of seating have also undergone significant changes, combining various art forms such as painting and sculpture, showing superb craftsmanship and artistic aesthetics.

In terms of decorative themes, seating in the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period usually adopts themes such as natural landscapes, plant patterns, and imaginary auspicious animals, which not only reflect people's admiration for the beauty of nature but also show a romantic mood. This style of seating not only meets people's practical needs but also meets people's aesthetic needs and has become an essential part of the social culture at that time.

During the Qin and Han dynasties, furniture styles underwent a major transformation. Bronze utensils, which were once popular among people, gradually lost their favor due to their cold, heavy, and mysterious characteristics. On the contrary, wooden furniture became a new favorite due to its convenience and practicality. During this period, beds became one of the most common furniture. They were not only used for sitting and lying but also became the center of people's daily lives.

In the Han Dynasty, the scope of use of beds was further expanded, covering almost all scenes in daily life. Whether it was banquets, entertaining guests, games, reading or sleeping, or even during court meetings and office work, people would choose to do it on the bed. The versatility of beds made it an indispensable part of social life at that time.

At the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty, the style of Chinese furniture once again underwent an important change. As the exchanges between the northern nomadic peoples and the Central Plains deepened, their sitting furniture, the Hu bed, began to be introduced into the Central Plains. The so-called Hu bed is the name the Han people gave to the sitting furniture introduced from the Western Regions. Before the Tang and Song Dynasties, "bed" did not refer exclusively to bedding; all sitting and sleeping furniture were called beds [2]. It is worth noting that the introduction of the Hu bed is closely related to the formation of the chair later. Just by slightly modifying the Hu bed and adding a backrest and armrests, the chair we are familiar with today can be evolved. The Hu bed is an important predecessor and source of inspiration for the formation of ancient Chinese chairs.

During the Wei, Jin, Southern, and Northern Dynasties, the social atmosphere was remarkably open, and the culture showed the characteristics of diversity. As people's sitting postures became more and more casual, such as sitting with legs curled up and sitting cross-legged, new types of seats, such as armchairs, also came into being. The introduction of these high seats gradually made sitting with legs hanging down the mainstream sitting posture, further satisfying people's pursuit of a comfortable sitting posture. This preference for stretching sitting and lying postures also indirectly promoted the continuous development of high seats.

Although the emergence and popularity of high seats posed a considerable impact on the traditional custom of sitting on the ground, low beds and other furniture still dominated throughout the Wei, Jin,

Southern, and Northern Dynasties, however, the height of the beds during this period increased compared with the past, showing new changes.

During the Sui and Tang Dynasties, culture and art flourished, revealing a prosperous scene. This prosperous situation also profoundly influenced the development of Chinese furniture, making this period an important period of change in the history of Chinese furniture. According to Tang Dynasty documents, the term "chair" first appeared in the Tang Dynasty, indicating the existence and popularity of chairs at that time.

After the "Zhen Guan Reign," the design style of chairs gradually showed the characteristics of being thick, full, wide, and stable. Not only was it heavy and majestic, but it also revealed a graceful shape in the uniform symmetry of the composition, and the color was rich and free. At the same time, the hanging foot or high foot backrest chair emerged with the popularity of Buddhism and was deeply influenced by Persian culture. This backrest chair developed rapidly, but it had not yet replaced the orthodox position of the couch in furniture [3].

The style of Tang Dynasty seats not only embodies the characteristics of elegance and luxury, but also retains a fresh style. This distinctive style feature undoubtedly provides valuable reference and inspiration for the furniture design of later generations.

In the history of chair development, the Song Dynasty was a period full of humanities, craftsmanship, and scientific spirit. Deeply influenced by Taoist thought, the chairs of the Song Dynasty showed uprightness and beauty in overall style. In terms of decoration, they preferred simplicity and elegance and paid attention to local embellishment to achieve the effect of finishing touches.

During this period, Song-style furniture not only truly entered the homes of ordinary people but also showed a cultural temperament that emphasized both humanities, craftsmanship, and science. The types of furniture have become complete, and the shape, structure, and decoration technology have reached a fairly mature level. In addition to the classic styles of the previous generation, the Song Dynasty also creatively developed a unique round-back chair.

The Song Dynasty's cross-legged chair cleverly combined the height of the Hu bed and the characteristics of easy folding, as well as the upright sitting of the Han Confucian culture and the elegance of the Taoist culture, becoming an outstanding achievement of cultural exchange and integration. In addition, the chairs of the Song Dynasty also include backrest chairs, backrest chairs with armrests, five-legged backrest chairs, thrones, and sedan chairs, etc., fully demonstrating its diversity and innovation.

The Ming Dynasty armchairs are "clever and appropriate, quiet and suitable." They not only meet the functional needs in the overall design but also have distinct characteristics in form. The Ming Dynasty armchairs have only one integral wooden board, and its curve matches the human spine. It is simple and bright and makes people feel comfortable when sitting on it [4]. Designers cleverly use the beautiful wood grain and original wood color of the wood itself to perfectly integrate the beauty of nature with human ingenuity so that the appearance of Ming-style chairs not only shows the natural beauty of timber but also reflects the exquisite craftsmanship of human wisdom. This design concept not only enhances the beauty of furniture but also reflects the harmonious coexistence of man and nature.

Secondly, Taoist thought advocates simplicity, simplicity, and elegance, and this aesthetic concept is also fully reflected in the structure of Ming-style chairs. The structure of Ming-style chairs is simple and round, with smooth lines and rich curves, which not only gives people visual enjoyment but also brings a comfortable experience in touch. At the same time, Ming-style chairs are also unique in "structural decoration." These decorative parts are not only decorative elements of furniture but also an important part of its load-bearing structure, making the furniture achieve a perfect balance between beauty and practicality. This design concept not only enhances the stability and durability of furniture but also provides important inspiration and reference for the development of modern furniture.

In the Qing Dynasty, the furniture design style was deeply influenced by the Manchu noble culture. Thus, Qing-style chairs present extreme refinement, luxury, and nobility. This style is mainly reflected in their magnificent appearance, complex carving craftsmanship, and solid structure.

In terms of material selection, Qing Dynasty chairs mainly use precious wood, which is not only of extremely high value, but also can show the solemn and beautiful temperament of furniture. Therefore, Qing Dynasty chairs are often favored by the upper class and become an indispensable seat in their daily life.

However, Qing Dynasty chairs are not just people's daily seats, but also a symbol of power and

majesty. In the palace, chairs are a symbol of imperial power, noble identity and status, and their design, production and use are full of ritual. This emphasis on power and majesty also affects the design style of folk furniture.

In folk art, although chairs are influenced by the palace style and become rough and powerful, they still maintain their simple and elegant characteristics. This style reflects the folks' yearning for and imitation of aristocratic culture and also shows the unique charm of folk crafts.

From the simplicity and clarity of Ming-style furniture, which focused on functional use, to the cumbersome decoration and precious materials of Qing-style furniture, Chinese furniture design moved in another direction of development during this period. Although this change caters to the aesthetic needs of the ruling class to a certain extent, it has also caused the furniture design industry to gradually lose the motivation for innovation and development and inevitably decline.

However, despite this, we still cannot deny the artistic value of Qing-style furniture. Its magnificent decorative effect not only brings us a great visual aesthetic impact but also shows the exquisite skills and unique aesthetics of the craftsmen at that time. These exquisite chairs are not only a witness to history, but also a treasure in the cultural treasure house of the Chinese nation.

3. The history of chair development in the world

The history of chairs not only epitomizes the development of furniture but also bears witness to cultural, artistic, and social changes. From the simple folding stools of Ancient Egypt to the status symbol chairs of Ancient Greece to the elegant designs of the Renaissance, the evolution of chairs reflects the pursuit of the aesthetics and functionality of different civilizations. This section will explore the important milestones in the development of chairs around the world, analyzing their design features and the cultural significance behind them in different historical periods.

In ancient Egyptian families, stools were one of the most commonly used pieces of furniture. They were used for a variety of purposes, not only as daily seating but also on ceremonial occasions. Among these stools, a particularly simple and primitive X-shaped folding stool is particularly eye-catching. The X-shaped folding stool is mainly made of wood, and the stool surface is made of fabric, animal skin, and other materials or is woven. The slightly concave design makes it more comfortable. The four cylindrical legs of the stool are crossed in an X shape, and the lower ends of the legs are cleverly designed into the shape of a duck head and connected to a crossbar. What's more ingenious is that the duck head is inlaid with ivory, depicting the shape of the eyes and nostrils, making the image lifelike. It is worth mentioning that this folding form of X-shaped crossed legs was not only popular at the time, but has also been used to this day, becoming a classic furniture design element.

In ancient Greek society, chairs were a symbol of the hierarchy, a hierarchy that could not be ignored. However, the most outstanding achievement is a lightweight backrest chair called *Chrismos*. This chair is characterized by its simple shape, appropriate proportions, and beautiful lines, fully demonstrating the essence of ancient Greek furniture design. The design of the *Christos* chair is ingenious. The backrest fits the curve of the human back and provides comfortable support, while the saber-shaped legs that bend outward give it unique stability and beauty. The seat is woven and covered with soft cushions, which are both practical and beautiful.

Before the 16th century, chairs were an extremely rare piece of furniture, and in the Middle Ages, they were a symbol of authority and status. Even in lavishly decorated mansions, chairs were rarely seen, usually reserved for the owner or distinguished guests. The typical Gothic chair is a unique design that combines vertical lines with a closed box-shaped seat that is cleverly hinged, like a covered treasure chest [5]. The chair's backrest is particularly high, which not only reflects its intention as a symbol of authority but also emphasizes the chair's presence in the space.

During the Renaissance, as the social life of the nobility became increasingly rich and their way of thinking changed profoundly, a modernized light chair based on ancient Roman design gradually replaced the box-style chairs popular in the Gothic era. Among these chairs, the most eye-catching are undoubtedly the *Dante* chair and the *Savonarola* chair, both of which are derived from the seats of the ancient Roman consuls, and on this basis, the design elements of armrests and backrests are added. The *Dante* chair is named after the great Italian poet Dante, who had a special liking for this chair, with four thick, S-shaped legs on each side and folding armrests. This chair is not only exquisite in appearance, but also uses decorative techniques such as inlay and carving on its surface, so it has been widely used in public ceremonial venues.

In the leisurely atmosphere of the Louis XV era, the nobles' love for chairs reached its peak, and this enthusiasm gave rise to a series of new chair designs with elegant shapes and excellent sitting comfort. These chairs not only cleverly combined artistic beauty with practical functions but also created a timeless Rococo furniture style. Among them, the "Fauteuil" and "Bergere" chairs are particularly eye-catching, and they have become outstanding representatives of furniture design of this era.

The British Adam chair has shown its extraordinary charm with its unique shape and craftsmanship. Its legs are slender and sharp, with either square or round cross-sections. The backrest design of the chair is also eye-catching, mainly in square, round, or shield shapes, and it is simple yet elegant. Particularly worth mentioning is the Adam-style shield-shaped chair back, whose curved lines contrast with the Greek saber-shaped hind legs, forming a unique artistic style. It allows people to enjoy its unique beauty while also feeling incomparably comfortable.

During World War II, in order to improve the comfort and safety of pilots, designers began to focus on the ergonomic design of seats. After the war, as a large amount of military technology was transferred to the civilian market, aviation seat technology was also widely used in the design of civilian office chairs. Over time, the design of ergonomic seats has been continuously improved and developed and gradually applied to various office environments and transportation. These seats not only focus on comfort and support but also take into account factors such as environmental protection, energy saving, and sustainability. In the future, ergonomic chairs will definitely be developed more.

4. Conclusions

In the development of the Chinese chair, style changes in different historical periods not only reflect the evolution of society and culture but also highlight people's pursuit of quality of life. From the combination of utility and aesthetics during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods to the ultimate pursuit of form and decoration during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, furniture design has always been closely linked to the context of the times. Although furniture in the Qing Dynasty reached its peak in splendor and sophistication, it also led to a stagnation of innovation to some extent. However, whether it is the simple Ming furniture or the gorgeous Qing furniture, they all carry rich cultural connotations and artistic values and have become an important part of the cultural treasures of the Chinese nation. Through the study of these historical furniture styles, we can not only better understand the profound heritage of traditional Chinese culture but also draw inspiration from modern design, realizing the harmony and unity between man and nature, function, and aesthetics.

Through a review of the history of the development of the world chair, we can see that the chair is not only a practical piece of furniture but also an important embodiment of the culture and art of each era. From the ancient status symbol chair to the modern ergonomic design, the evolution of the chair demonstrates mankind's continuous exploration of comfort and aesthetics. With the progress of science and technology, the future chair design will continue to innovate and integrate environmental protection and functionality, bringing more convenience and beauty to our lives.

In addition, by comparing the differences in chair design concepts between China and other countries and regions, we can see the diversity of Eastern and Western cultures. These differences and diversities are even more apparent in modern chair design. With the development of time, Chinese chairs have gradually transitioned from using softwoods such as camphor wood and cypress to using hardwoods such as huanghuali and zitan. In contrast, Western chairs have become more diversified in their choice of materials. In addition to wood, new materials, such as metal, plastic, fiberglass, etc., are also used extensively. These materials facilitate mass production, which can benefit the capitalists and reflect the humanistic idea of the supremacy of interests in Western society.

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