THE INFLUENCE OF CHINESE CHAIR SPLATS ON EARLY ENGLISH RATTAN CHAIRS IN THE 17TH CENTURY

The 17th Century Rattan Chair Trade (Part 3)

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Abstract: This paper examines the early roots that influenced the introduction of the woven rattan chair splat in English furniture from around the 1660s. The objective of this research is to collate evidence of a culture of consistent woven splat use on Chinese chairs in the centuries preceding the introduction of weaved splats and seats in Europe in the 17th century. To achieve this objective, visual sources from Japan that relate to Chinese chair design are employed to supplement a lack of surviving Chinese examples. It is envisaged that this study will contribute towards a better understanding of why, and in what way, rattan was imported from Asia and used in English chairs during this time. A study of the development of chair forms in both England and China demonstrate that it is likely that woven splats on straight chair backs popular in the East were adopted into English chair design prior to the importation of the solid splat in the first decades of the 18th century. Specifically, splats of Chinese origin directly influenced the uptake of rattan and solid splats in European chair manufacture as a result of sustained international trade between the two continents. Different construction techniques however, may be seen as responsible for the delayed uptake of the solid splat from the turn of the 18th century.

Keywords: Chair splat, Rattan weaving, English chair, Chinese chair, East and West interchange

1. Background

In the second half of the 17th century the London chair industry saw a surge in demand for low-to-medium cost furniture, in part as a result of the great fire of London of 1666 that destroyed many buildings and possessions contained within. Beech and walnut chairs with woven seats and back sections, employing rattan imported from South-East Asia, became popular from this time in England and other European countries, notably France and the Netherlands. These chairs forms were a significant departure from traditional English and European chair forms that predominantly used a solid, uninterrupted back rest that was tenoned directly between the two back-uprights. It has previously been demonstrated that both the use of rattan in furniture seating and the pattern of weaving used, ba jiao kong yan wen (八角孔眼纹), was common in China before and during the Ming dynasty, and before European exposure at the turn of the 17th century.

2. Introduction

This study is the third part of three related studies investigating the beginnings of the rattan trade from Asia to Europe in the 17th century. In response to a lack of in-depth analysis of the historical design development of rattan seated furniture, two related studies preceding this current study have focussed on 1) the structural link between Ming-style woven seats and English rattan seated chairs and armchairs from around 1660 and 2) the establishment of rattan weaving in Chinese furniture before and during the Ming dynasty. It has been demonstrated from Japanese National Heritage collections that rattan weaving has been in consistent use in China for many centuries, and its introduction into furniture seating came from at least the Liao dynasty (916-1125) [1]. It is suggested that Chinese chair forms that were exposed to European furniture makers forms the principal antecedent for the uptake of rattan in England during the latter decades of the 17th century.
Current scholarship relating to the development of English rattan seated chairs and armchairs (known contemporarily as cane chairs) has in some cases argued for an Indian antecedent for these unique chair forms. Trade between England and Indian coastal ports in the 17th century provides the background for this assertion. In terms of extant evidence, ebony "coastal" chairs constructed along the Coromandel Coast of India are said to have been in production from a slightly earlier period than European rattan seated chairs that were being made from the 1660s. In turn, Dutch traders may have brought examples of these chairs back to the Netherlands from Batavia, and thus introduced the technique of rattan weaving to European furniture makers [2]. However, there is little doubt that these chairs were principally produced for Europeans in the East, with currently no evidence of indigenous construction and use before the expansion of European trading posts in the mid 17th century.

This paper address a key characteristic of European rattan seated chairs and armchairs. From the very onset the woven rattan seat was introduced alongside a woven splat; a section of weaving that formed a back rest in between the back uprights. As will be demonstrated, this is a design feature not uncommon to Chinese chair design several centuries prior to the Ming dynasty. A solid splat is herein defined as an uninterrupted central plane of wood running from the rear of the seat to the chair top-rail and is independent from the back uprights (which are in most early European cases twist-turned or baluster columns). A woven splat is similarly an uninterrupted central panel of woven material set within a frame that is independent from the back uprights. Popular chair forms evident in England during the 17th century typically lack any form of central splat, preferring instead a back rest that is tenoned directly to the back uprights. This study looks at the possible Chinese roots of European woven chair splats, and explores the use of this design feature in the Far East. Figure 1 shows a Japanese illustration of a Chinese-style armchair with woven seat and vertical woven splat that dates from the late Ming or early Qing dynasty.

3. Research Objectives

The two previous studies in this series have attempted to demonstrate the existence of a continued and consistent culture of rattan use in the seating of Chinese furniture. This current study strives to make a similar case regarding the back of Chinese chairs and, specifically, the chair splat. It will argue that the woven rattan splat with accompanying woven seat is a feature of Chinese chair design that was in popular use long before the likely flourishing period of "coastal" chairs from India and South East Asia. It will further seek to address the initial introduction of the chair splat in English furniture in the second half of the 17th century, asking why this chair form was adopted.

The central objective of this study is thus to provide evidence of a culture of using woven splats in a Chinese context that predated the uptake of this unique design form in Europe. It then seeks to contextualise the adoption of this design form by addressing why the woven rattan splat was taken up at the stage that it was, in preference to the other popular Chinese chair form, the solid splat.

4. Research Methods

For the analysis of the splat and woven splat of early English rattan seated chairs, a field survey of 17th century English rattan seated chairs and armchairs was made from four collections in the UK: The Victoria and Albert Museum, The Lady Lever Gallery, The Geffrye Museum and Temple Newsam House. To examine the early Indo-Dutch chairs and the later, 18th century Queen Anne chairs with rattan seats and Chinese solid splats a survey was made at the Museum Sejarah Jakarta in Indonesia.

Published sources concerning Chinese painting and literature dating up to and during the Ming dynasty were used to demonstrate chair splat development before it informed European chair design in the 17th century. As with the preceding two studies in this series, surviving Japanese texts, images and objects that relate to China and date from the Nara period onwards are used to provide support to supplement the lack of surviving Chinese sources.

Fig. 1 Chair with both woven seat and woven splat, late Ming or early Qing dynasty. Kano Nobumasa (野野信政, 1607-1658)
5. Chair Splat Overview
5.1 English Chair Forms
Traditional chair designs popular in England during the middle of the 17th century in the most part employed a back rest that stretched between both back uprights with no interruption. While a variety of forms were in usage, five traditional English chair types made of oak that were probably still in popular use during the middle of the 17th century are shown in Figure 2 [3]. These include: A) Upholders’ turkeywork backstool; B) Joined leather backstool; C) Joined caqueteuse armchair; D) Joined armchair; E) “Turned-all-over” armchair.

The simultaneous introduction of the woven splat alongside the woven seat in English chairs and armchairs should be seen as a significant and dramatic shift in chair form that indicates an external foreign influence. It should be noted that this introduction of new chair forms seems to have also chronologically occurred alongside the adoption of spiral, or twist-turned, columns that facilitated the use of the central splat.

These, and later “turned” columns (produced using the same lathe technique used on “turned-all-over” chairs, Figure 2 type E) helped facilitate the use of a splat. In practical terms, turned columns were ideal to fulfil the function of the back-uprights, and thereby isolating the back splat, in a decorative manner. In some ways, the awkward and excessive use of turned columns in the “turned-all-over” chair can be seen as something of an experimental testing vehicle that anticipated the central weaved splat with which it would form such a popular partnership.

The initial type of English woven splat seems to have been a single panel of ba jiao kong yan wen (6-way) rattan weaving held between two vertical slats. The splat is, in turn, positioned between the two back-uprights (in most cases the aforementioned turned columns), all of which is tenoned to the crest-rail at the top and rear of the seat at the bottom. Later adaptations of the single, almost square woven splat later took place. Two variations that are usually dated to the last two decades of the 17th century are demonstrated in Figure 3. As the weaving of rattan became finer towards the end of the 17th century, the chair forms themselves grew in elegance; A) shows a double splat between turned columns and B) shows a slim woven splat that found popularity on armed and armless chairs with raked legs and reclined back.

5.2 Chinese Splats
5.2.1 Central Solid Splat
The transition from a culture of floor-level sitting, using woven mats of natural fibres, to raised seating on individual chairs in China is addressed in many publications, though a consensus has been formed that this shift in cultural behaviour was a direct influence of the Byzantine Empire [4]. The central, curved splat that is so synonymous with Ming-style chairs and armchairs can be seen as an
independent design form in itself, developing after the use of horizontal slats that was presumably viewed as ergonomically uncomfortable. An excavated example of a model funerary yoke-back chair, with horizontal slats that form a backrest and provide support for the back-uprights, dates from around the 11th century Liao dynasty in what is now Inner Mongolia [5]. It has been suggested that the gently curved vertical splat, that is so often associated with Ming-style side chairs and armchairs, replaced rigid, yoke-back chairs around the 12th century [6].

In European chair design the carved central solid splat, which Europeans would surely have associated with contemporary Chinese chairs, proliferated from the first decades of the 18th century. This is despite the fact that the 1660s, several decades earlier, was the probable period of adoption of the woven rattan splat in England. This type of chair employed a solid central splat and in England were commonly termed contemporarily as “Queen Anne”, referring to the period of reign that this monarch enjoyed (1702-1714), and the period this chair form was popularized. It has recently been argued, however, that this type – employing a carved splat reminiscent of a Chinese solid splat and cabriole legs – dates from slightly later, from around the 1620s [8]. It is also important here to note that the introduction and use of the solid splat on English and European chairs was often made alongside a use of woven rattan seats (Figure 6).

Fig. 4 Ming dynasty wood block print, depicting vertical splats on different chair types

An important Ming dynasty document (三才图会) illustrates a number of chair forms said to have been in contemporary usage at that time, shown in Figure 4. Each chair illustration exhibits a straight splat with a slight curve. While these illustrations date from the Ming dynasty, it should be noted that the author makes reference to a Han dynasty document, and states that all these chair forms were in existence from this period [7]. In any case, what is certain is that the s-curved splat, being introduced at a later date, achieved its zenith during the Ming dynasty, as evidenced by both extant furniture and a great many illustrations, such as the wood block print Ming Wan Li Jian Kan Ben shown in Figure 5.

Fig. 5 Ming Dynasty curved splat on horse-shoe back and lamp-hanger armchairs. Wood block prints, Ming Wan Li Jian Kan Ben

Fig. 6 English chair with gently s-curving and unadorned vertical splat that separates two panels of ba jiao kong yan wen rattan weaving. Early 18th century, Victoria & Albert Museum

5.2.2 Influence of Chinese Buddhism

Chinese Buddhism had a substantial and lasting impact on Japanese society and artistic expression on the Japanese artists from the Nara period onwards. While raised seating is not recognised as an indigenous feature of Japanese culture, Buddhist practice that had reached its zenith during the Heian period (794-1185) did utilize chair forms copied or derived from existing Chinese versions.

The transfer of design forms relating to raised seating is born out most overtly through the proliferation of chairs with central splats that are well represented on Japanese artwork depicting Buddhist scenes during the Nara period. Figure 7 depicts the Chinese missionary Jianzhen (or Ganjin 般真), who was credited with introducing the Ritsu school of Buddhism to Japan. In this scroll, painted
by Ninshou (忍性, 1217-1303), a chair with a central, solid splat that curves gently away from the seat, is shown [9]. The monk sits with legs crossed beneath him, his shoes placed, unworn, beneath the chair.

5.2.3 Early Woven Splits
In view of the close theological relationship between China and Japan, Buddhist artwork produced in Japan from the Nara period onwards yields an insight into imported ideas, motifs, and even chair forms, from China and further along the Silk Road. The Buddhist connection between the two lands was direct, with Buddhist documents being actively sought out and imported into Japan from China, with copies being made. One such example that made its way to Japan was produced during the Northern Song dynasty, a detail of which is shown below in Figure 8 [10].

Alongside the straight splat, the 胡坐 type of chair (its name referring to the manner in which the sitter is positioned above folded legs) is a form that was referred to in the aforementioned Han dynasty document [11]. An extant chair of this type with woven rattan seat and dating from the Nara period is found in Shōsōin repository in Nara prefecture, Japan, though a low, horizontal yoke is employed in preference to a splat. This chair type was also depicted with a woven splat in a series of paintings produced in the Southern Song dynasty, in the latter half of the 12 century in what is now Yunnan province (大理国) by Zhang Sheng Wen (張勝溫). This image, shown below in Figure 9, shows a disciple of Buddha sitting cross-legged on a 胡坐 type chair with a woven central panel depicted [12]. Given the manner of sitting, it would be assumed that the weaving in this form plays a predominantly decorative role, as opposed to a functional one. It is a chair form that is often seen in Japanese illustrations, and also seems to have later been adopted in secular portraiture as evidenced, for example, in 18th century images depicting the Nara period by Tosa Mitsuyoshi [13]. This chair form should be considered perhaps the most representative of the influence of chair design emanating from China prior to the Ming dynasty.

5.2.4 ‘Japanese’ Chair Forms
The subject matter of Rakan and the sixteen Arhats - disciples of Buddha - proves a rich source of chair representations in Japanese artwork. Possibly the oldest existing series of paintings depicting this subject is found in the Tokyo National Museum, although formerly housed in Shōjuraigō-ji Temple in Otsu, Shiga Prefecture, and is dated to the Heian period – sometime during the eleventh century – shown in Figure 10 [14]. This chair type has a tall, straight back, with two clearly defined slats that run
vertically from the rear of the seat to the top rail, between and distinct from the two uprights, forming an open splat. In this example, a cloth or “chair runner” forms the support needed to bear the weight of the back as it rests against the open splat. The thick chair legs contrast starkly with the slender forms of the Ming period that utilize the stronger, tropical hard woods. In another example that depicts the same chair type, similarly dated to the later Heian, Fujiwara period (898–1185), a simple webbing is used to form a woven splat. This provides the resistance needed to bear the weight of the sitter distributing their weight backwards, see Figure 11. This image is taken from a series of silk paintings in the collection of Hōryūji temple in Japan [15] that also focuses on the popular depiction of the Buddhist Arhats. It has been suggested that the webbing shown here represents the fabric brace that supports a finer weaving that lies on top; in the manner that has been popular since at least the Ming dynasty [16]. In recent scholarship discussing this chair type, reference is invariably made to two articles written by a Chinese scholar of Peking University in 1942 and 1948 respectively. In these articles, the author suggests that this chair form was found in Japan during the Tang dynasty (618-907) [17]. No supporting evidence is referenced in these documents however, and it seems likely that one or both the visual sources presented here, Figures 12 and 13, provide the basis of this assertion. Stylistically, this chair type retains an overt Chinese connection in terms of the chair structure. The ends of the top rail are curled upward, in the same manner as the previously mentioned excavated funerary chair from Inner Mongolia that dates from roughly the same period as these Japanese paintings.

5.3 17th Century Woven Splats

During the early Ming dynasty there is unfortunately a paucity of surviving documents, both visual and literary, relating to the use of woven splats in chair design. During the early stages of the Qing dynasty and early Edo period it is, however, possible to see illustrated depictions of woven splats in East Asia more consistently. Figure 12 shows a portrait taken from a series of paintings by Ch'en Hung-shou entitled Ying-chu shih-liu kuan ("Living in Seclusion") [18].

This image depicts a scholar drinking from a lotus cup entitled “Drinking at Daybreak”, painted in 1651. The chair is a gnarled wood chair not uncommon in Chinese furniture design [19], and has a separate woven splat running vertically that provides a clean surface for the head to rest against. The weaving that is depicted is in a ren zi wen (人字纹) pattern, a style that can be found on images of furniture depicted in wood block prints dating from the Ming dynasty.
In a slightly later portrait, dating from around the turn of the 18th century, during the reign of Kang xi (1654-1722), the Han dynasty hero Si Ma Qian is depicted in Qing kang xi zhong ye kan ban sitting on a chair with both woven splat and seat, Figure 13 [20]. While some features of this chair are indeed representative of the Qing-style, it again shows the same ren zi wen weaving pattern.

This same weaving pattern can be seen on a Chinese folding chair that is depicted on a Japanese byōbu screen that is said to date from the first half of the 17th century. This well-known screen illustrates the “Arrival of Foreigners” into Japan, and a servant is shown carrying a folding chair (with the characteristic curled top rail associated with much earlier Chinese furniture) on his shoulders, Figure 14 [21]. A similar image of what is probably a Portuguese trader hefting a Chinese folding chair (交椅) with similar curled top rail is also depicted on a lacquered intro that is dated indeterminately to the Edo period, Figure 15. In this case the weaving style, though heavily stylized, hints at a possible open weave such as that used in European chair manufacture [22].

Chinese folding chairs proved hugely popular in East Asia; foreign-made examples with vertical solid splats dating from the late Ming dynasty and early Qing dynasty are found in both Japanese and Korean national heritage collections respectively. It was an ideal accessory for Europeans traders – light enough to be carried on the shoulder and easily folded away – and probably particularly convenient for the Portuguese in Japan, where a chair culture was not in existence outside the Buddhist sphere of influence. It could be tentatively argued that it was initially Chinese folding chairs that employed woven splats (ideal for saving weight and providing comfort on a portable frame) that made a positive impression on the first waves of European traders in East Asia, who then saw the potential of this innovation and introduced examples to joiners and cabinet makers in Europe [23].

6. Discussion

Though few, if any, extant examples of furniture survives to explain the level of frequency that woven splats enjoyed in Chinese chair design up to and during the Ming dynasty, illustrations depicting Chinese-style woven splats in both Chinese and Japanese artwork suggests that this form saw continued use in the centuries prior to expanded European trade in the 17th century. Figure 18 on page 9 charts the examples found thus far that depict this unique chair structure in China and Japan.

A culture of woven splat-use in chair forms in East Asia, it is suggested here, provided the antecedent for the adoption of this design form in English chairs from the 1660s. However, in response to why the woven rattan splat was adopted, one must look at its place in the chronological sequence in which other individual forms that are generally speaking - unique to China were adopted in English and European chair design as a whole. The solid, central splat is in this case of crucial importance.
The proliferation of this chair form from at least the 12th century in China, and its use by Buddhist missionaries in Japan, leaves little doubt that this structural and stylistic design form was ostensibly recognised contemporarily (as we still do now) as Chinese in nature. Equally, as has been previously mentioned, the first decades of the 18th century saw this chair form adopted in English furniture, though it was a style to prove popular in other European countries. Jan Veenendaal, in his authoritative work on Dutch furniture in the East, suggested that the adoption of the Chinese solid splat in English furniture was a result of the restrictions placed on imported lacquer from the Far East in 1702, which in turn encouraged further experimentation with Chinese forms [24]. However, given that David Bowing has shown that the “Queen Anne” chair forms may be dated considerably later than the turn of the 18th century, this research proposes an additional point: The solid splat in English chairs was adopted considerably later than the straight woven splat because of the difficulty in imitating or reproducing the Chinese s-curved splat. The technique used to produce the unique s-curve requires the use of a labour intensive and time-consuming method of sawing. Even the most cursory of glances at English rattan seated chairs of the 17th century reveal crude and hasty carving at the rear; this furniture type was generally not intended to exhibit a sense of quality or high expense.

This was not true of the “Queen Anne” type of chairs that in most cases employed a solid splat with a much shallower curve, or no curve at all. Figure 16 shows a “Chinese-style” side chair in the Museum Sejarah Jakarta that dates from around the middle of the 18th century and has been inspired by the English “Queen Anne” collection of forms. Covered in red lacquer with gold details and unrestrained cabriole legs, it was meant to overtly convey a sense of “Chinese” design. Despite the obvious Chinese overtones, the central splat is reclined backwards, but does not curve in the manner of Ming dynasty-style chair splats.

The difficulty, or reluctance, in reproducing this form would help explain why English and European chair manufacturers initially introduced a vase-shaped splat on this chair type; a straight central splat looks static and heavy, while a curved vase-shaped splat makes the chair considerably visually lighter, and compensates for the lack of an s-curve. Conversely, it also explains the lack of ornamentation on English examples that do employ an s-curved splat, such as the example from the V&A shown earlier in Figure 6. It is worth noting that in this museum alone, out of ten “Queen Anne” style chairs dating from the first half of the 18th century, only two have simple, undorned splats and both are shaped in an s-curve; the remaining chairs have elaborately carved profiles and are “bended” only gently, or not at all. Figure 17 demonstrates the manner in which the s-curve is incorporated on a Ming-style horse-shoe back armchair, and the straight, reclined woven splat of an English side chair dating from the third quarter of the 17th century.
Figure 18: Time chart showing depictions of woven splats and chair backs in Chinese (left column) and Japanese (right column) illustrations.
Conclusions

From the preceding discussion, three main points can be presented:

1) Illustrative sources depicting Chinese and Chinese-inspired chairs in China and Japan confirm that a culture of using woven splats was probably in evidence for several centuries prior to the Ming dynasty. From these illustrative sources it appears that the chair forms used to accommodate the woven splat may have generally been of basic or modest construction.

2) The culture of woven splat use in China provided the antecedent for the adoption of the woven splat in England in the second half of the 17th century. This design form was appealing because of its suitability in complementing other design features, such as the twist-turned column. Its use in English furniture was brief, however, lasting until around the first two decades of the 18th century.

3) The European adoption of the woven splat was superseded in the first decades of the 18th century by the Chinese-inspired solid splat. This design form was considered of a higher quality, as indicated by the superior level of carving and extensive use of gilt on surviving examples. Due to the labour involved in reproducing the s-curve associated with Ming-style armchairs and side chairs, however, the innovative vase-like profile was introduced by European chair makers as an elegant alternative.

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References and Notes

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