

Daily Dining Tables of Emperors in the Qing Dynasty

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Dining table is the daily necessity for the Qing emperor. However, emperors' dining tables in the Royal Court were quite different from those of commoners' in the folk. According to archives, Qing emperors normally used low tables put on the heatable brick bed rather than high tables laid on the ground. These low dining tables were mainly made of red sandalwood, huanghuali wood and lacquered wood. In Qing emperor's daily meal, not just one low table, but a combination of multiple low tables was used. When the emperor leaved the Forbidden City on trip or inspection tour, folding low tables were applied.

Keywords: dining tables, emperor of the Qing dynasty, daily use

Introduction

Eating is an important issue of daily life, even to the supreme emperor of a country. In the Qing Imperial Court, daily meal of the emperor was called JinShan. Emperor's dining tables were quite different from those of common people. Actually Qing emperors' daily diet included breakfast and dinner as formal meals. In addition, emperor sometimes had morning snacks before breakfast and drinking supplement after dinner. The time of formal breakfast was usually around Mao hour (5:00 am to 7:00 am) every day, and the formal dinner was around Wei hour (1:00 pm to 3:00 pm), according to the emperor's practical order. The content of breakfast and dinner normally included dishes prepared by the Imperial Kitchen, meals made by the concubines' kitchens, and some Extra Food specialized for bestow and award. The emperor commonly ate alone rather than dining with others in daily meals. The place to eat is not fixed. Generally the emperor dined where he did business and activities, such as the East Warm Cabin of the Cultivating Heart Hall (Yangxin dian), the Expanding Virtue Hall (Hongde dian), and the Inheriting Virtue Palace (Chonghua gong).

Shape of Tables

Based on historical recordings, Qing emperors' dining tables for daily use were mostly low tables standing on the fire brick bed, rather than high tables commonly used in the folk. In archives of *The Qing Palace Emperor's Meal File*, which recorded emperor's daily food and tableware, we can find plenty of proves, for example: "On Jun. 1st Qianlong 48th Year emperor has breakfast with low table decorated by lacquer and covered by tablecloth, in the Hall of Jin Zhao Yu Cui" (The First Historical Archives of China, 1980, p. 176), "On Dec. 29th emperor has breakfast with low dining table of longevity of sea house adding chips design in the Hall of Jin Zhao Yu Cui" (The First Historical Archives of China, 1980, p. 180), etc., all of these make it clear that Qing emperor's daily breakfast and dinner food was placed on low dining tables.

In addition, normally the actual size of the emperors' dining tables was not large according to records of

Royal Workshop Documents of Qing Imperial Palace. For example, in September of Yongzheng Forth Year (AD 1739), “Royal Workshop made one elm wood dining table for the emperor in the size of 2 Chinese chi 6 Chinese cun 8 Chinese fen in length, 1 chi 7 cun 8 fen in width, and 7 cun 8 fen in height” (The First Historical Archives of China, the Art Museum of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2007, p. 33). Converted to modern centimeter size, this elm wood dining table is 85.76 cm in length, 56.96 cm in width, and 24.96 cm in height, which can be seen is fairly low. Likewise, in October of Yongzheng Forth Year “Royal Workshop made one red lacquer dining table for the emperor in the size of 3 chi in length, 2 chi in width, and 8 cun 5 fen in height” (The First Historical Archives of China, the Art Museum of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2007, p. 33), which was converted to 96 cm in length, 64 cm in width, 27.2 cm in height. On the same day, “Royal workshop made one black lacquer dining table for the emperor in the size of 2 chi 8 cun in length, 9 cun in height” (The First Historical Archives of China, the Art Museum of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2007, p. 33), equaled to 89.6 cm in length, 28.8 cm in height. So far, we can see that the average size is nearly around 100 cm in length, 60 cm in width, and 30 cm in height, and the ratio of length, width, and height is close to 3:2:1. The style of these royal daily dining tables is generally rectangular desktop with 4 low legs. Till now, no high leg table had been found to appear in Qing emperors’ daily breakfast or dinner. Actually, high tables were only used in great banquets and ceremonies. Those high dining tables, for example: the grand banquet table, the grand Suzhou food banquet table, could raise up to nearly 100 cm in height, which were used with throne rather than fire brick bed.



Figure 1. Lacquered wood royal dining table (yellow background with colors, longevity of sea house adding chips design). Collected in the Palace Museum, Beijing; Size: 108×77×34 cm.



Figure 2. Grand banquet table (red lacquered wood with gold dragons pattern). Collected in the Palace Museum, Beijing; Size: 180×180×82 cm.

Materials

These imperial dining tables mainly were made of wood, among which red sandalwood, huanghuali wood, and lacquered wood acted as primary. Sometimes Nan wood, Yingzi wood, Elm wood, Korean wood, and some others wood were also referred to. Metal corners might also be used as partial decoration.

As recorded in *The Royal Workshop Documents of Qing Imperial Palace*, it can be seen that there were three styles of wood used in dining table producing. The first style is to totally use one kind of wood, the second style is to choose two kinds of wood or more, and the third is to paint lacquer on the wood. The first style, as on historical record in *The Royal Workshop Documents of Qing Imperial Palace* says: “On Mar. 23rd Yongzheng First Year, Prince Yi ordered to make six Huali wood dining tables for the emperor. On 24th May, the Imperial Workshop finished 2 Huali wood dining tables with good corner covers. On Aug. 11th, Imperial Workshop finished 3 Huali wood dining tables with good corner covers. On 9th Oct., Imperial Workshop finished 1 Huali wood dining tables with good corner covers” (The First Historical Archives of China, the Art Museum of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2007, p. 206). It can be seen that royal dining tables could be wholly made of one kind of wood like Huali wood etc., which means table’s frame and desktop were all one kind of wood. This style of dining table now is still collected in the Palace Museum in Beijing China like Figures 3a-3c (Compared to archives, these artifacts in Figures 3a-3c can be proved to be made according to the forward record). Besides Huali wood, some royal dining tables were made of red sandalwood, such as the record says: “A pair of dining table made of red sandalwood was tributed by officer Changlu on November 22nd Qianlong 20th year” (The First Historical Archives of China, the Art Museum of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2007, p. 599), etc.

The second style was also of big quantity, which combines two or more kinds of wood. For example, historical records says: “On July 1st Qianlong 31st Year, two pairs of dining table made of red sandalwood of frame and Yingzi wood of desktop were tributed by Yunnan and Guizhou Province Officer Yang Yingju” (The First Historical Archives of China, the Art Museum of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2007, p. 486) (Figure 4). “On 14th Mar. Yongzheng 1st Year, the Imperial Workshop finished making 2 dining tables made of red sandalwood of frame and Nan wood in desktop with silver coner covers, 1 dining table made of red sandalwood of frame and Nan wood in desktop, 2 dining tables made of Huali wood of frame and Nan wood in desktop” (The First Historical Archives of China, the Art Museum of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2007, p. 203-204) (Figure 5). In these pieces of record, the dining table is the combine of red sandalwood and Yingzi wood, red sandalwood and Nan wood, Huali wood and Nan wood. These record’s relevant artifacts also

collected in the Palace Museum, which were figured in Figures 4 and 5. Usually the dining table made of two kinds of wood can be divided into two parts: the frame and the desktop. The frame normally concluded four legs and the rims of the desktop. The desktop referred to the middle square part of the desktop. The royal wooden dining table is often decorated with gold and silver corners, which not only enhances the structural stability, but also shows the noble and beautiful appearance of the royal dining table.

Table of lacquered wood was another important style. This kind of tables generally uses wood as inner body and paint several layers of Chinese lacquer on the body, so that the wood could not be seen from the appearance. Imperial dining tables, according to historical archives, involved sole color lacquered pattern, multiple color lacquered pattern, and sole or multiple color lacquer with gold lines pattern. As for sole color lacquered tables, black and red ones were as primary. As to multiple color lacquered ones, yellow background with colors, red background with colors (Figure 6) and black background with colors were major. Gold drawings (Figure 7) sometimes added to the sole or multiple color lacquered table to make it more shining. Decorations on lacquered wood dining tables included the dragon design, the longevity design, the cloud bat design, the grass design, etc.



(a)



(b)



(c)

Figure 3. Huanghuali wood royal dining tables (with gold corners). Collected in the Palace Museum, Beijing; Size: Figure 3a: 90×58×28 cm, Figure 3b: 89×58.5×28 cm, Figure 3c: 93×58×29 cm.



Figure 4. Red sandalwood frame with Yingzi wood desktop royal dining table (with silver corners). Collected in the Palace Museum, Beijing; Size: 82.5×42.5×35.5 cm.



Figure 5. Red sandalwood frame with Nan wood desktop royal dining table (with silver corners). Collected in the Palace Museum, Beijing; Size: 87.5×58.5×22.5 cm.



Figure 6. Lacquered wood royal dining table (red background with colors, longevity design). Collected in the Palace Museum, Beijing; Size: 96.5×64×29 cm.



Figure 7. Lacquered wood royal dining table (black background with gold drawings, longevity of sea house adding chips design). Collected in the Palace Museum, Beijing; Size: 109×77×32 cm.

This artifact is made according to the record of *The Royal Workshop Documents of Qing Imperial Palace*: “On 29th Oct. Qianlong 47th Year, Imperial Tea and Kitchen offered a black background lacquer with gold drawings of Longevity Blessing imperial dining table” (The First Historical Archives of China, the Art Museum of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2007, p. 473-474).

When the emperor left the palace for inspection tour or trip, he tended to use foldable dining tables. Foldable dining tables were familiar to dining tables in materials and basic shape, but their legs can be folded. Compared to those dining tables used inside the palace that had fixed legs, foldable dining tables used outside the palace always had foldable legs instead. Legs of the folding dining tables can be withdrawn under the desktop to make the table smaller and more convenient to carry. As shown in Figure 8, this Huanghuali wood folding dining table’s four legs were departed into two sides, each side can be folded and hidden into the bottom of the desktop. Artifact in Figure 9 is another example, whose four legs can also be folded.



Figure 8. Huanghuali wood foldable royal dining tables (with gold corners), Collected in the Palace Museum, Beijing; Size: 89×58×29.5 cm.



Figure 9. Huanghuali wood foldable royal dining tables (with silver corners). Collected in the Palace Museum, Beijing; Size: 88×57×25.5 cm.

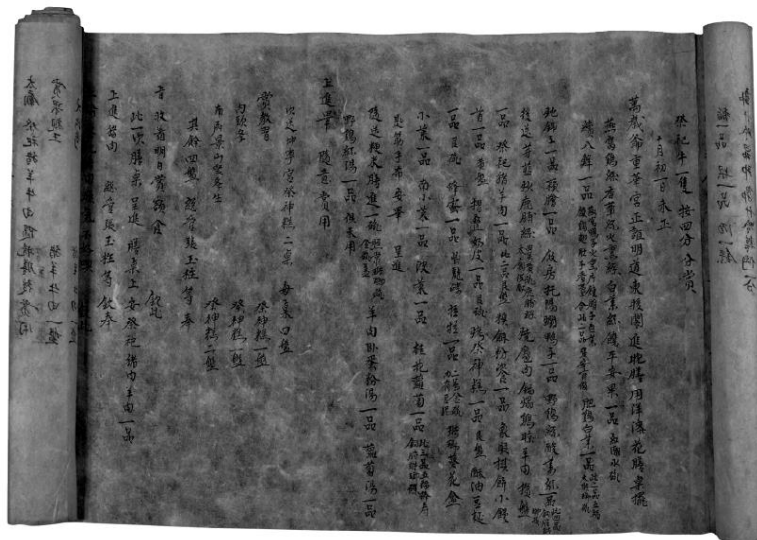



Figure 10. The Qing emperor's meal files. Collected in China First Historical Archives, Beijing.

Usage

When used in emperors' daily meal, several dining tables were set together for one meal. According to historical records in *Qing Emperor's Meal File*, the emperor might use three, six, or nine dining tables together for a meal based on different menu. As the last Emperor of the Qing Dynasty Puyi Aisin Gioro also wrote in his book *My First Half of Life*: when he had breakfast or dinner in the Forbidden City as emperor, "eunuchs carried seven large and small dining tables...and set them up in Dongnuan Pavilion", among which "two tables of daily dishes" ... in addition, "there are three tables of cookies, rice dishes, and porridge, and a small table of pickles", it can be found that more than one dining table was used one time, and different tables offered different meals (Aisin Gioro, 1999, p. 52).

The dining tables were placed on the fire brick bed rather than on the ground, so the emperor sat in front of the dining table on the bed to eat. This dining habit on the heatable brick bed seemed to be related to traditional dining customs of Manchu. Till nowadays, the Manchu people in the Northeast of China still maintain the practice of eating on heatable brick bed. Besides, there is another way of placing the dining table, which is to

uphold one dining table with the table called Tusigen table. As recorded in the book *The Palace Maiden Talks to the Past*, it is recalled that when the Empress Dowager Cixi had meals, there placed a low table named Tusergen table, then the dining table was put on the Tusigen table. Tusergen is the transliteration of Manchu language word , which means a kind of table a little higher than the dining table but of familiar shape and material. In the meal, no food would be placed on Tusergen. There appeared several dining tables in one meal, which means to put the first dining table with food on the Tusergen, then move away the first dining table, and set the second dining table with new food on the Tusergen, and then the third and forth so on.

For one emperor, he always owed many dining tables. He used different dining tables on one day. Meantime, the imperial dining tables were often bestowed by the emperor as a gift to his concubines and courtiers with the food left.

Conclusion

As can be seen from above, in the Qing Royal Court, emperors used low tables set on fire brick bed as daily meal dining tables. The shape of these low dining tables generally was rectangular desktop ones with four low legs. Normally, materials of them were red sandalwood, huanghuali wood, lacquered wood, etc. These low dining tables might be made by one kind of wood, two, or more kinds of wood and lacquered wood. When used in emperor's meal, several tables always appeared together. When the emperor left the Forbidden City for trip or inspection tour, foldable tables often were used instead of normal low dining tables.

Appendix

The Emperor's meal list from *The Qing Emperor's Meal Files* (China First Historical Archives, Thread Bound Bookstore, 2001, pp. 1-2), *Qing Dynasty Archives and Historical Materials Series 10* (Zhonghua Book Company, 1980, p. 176.)

1. On the 16th Jan. Qianlong 30th Year

Maochu second quarter (5:30 a.m.)

Please serve one bowl of stewed bird's nest with icy-sugar.

Maochu zheng first quarter (6:15 a.m.)

Emperor had breakfast in the East Warm Cabin of the Cultivating Heart Hall. Served with multiple color lacquered wood dining tables: one stewed bird's nest, stewed meat, and tofu with liquor in enamel bowl, steamed duck paste, pork, and deer tail, steamed bun in yellow plate, Concubine Shu, Concubine Ying, Concubine Yu, and Concubine Yuu tributed four dishes, two pastries, four small dishes on enamel silver plates, and one dish of noodles, and one water dish of old rice in enamel bowl. Extra food four tables: No. 2 yellow bowl dishes four, one shredded mutton in five blessing bowl, 8 milk food dishes. A dining table of 15 dishes of pastries. A dining table of eight dishes of meat. A dining table of two dishes of mutton. The emperor finished eating, and rewarded the concubines the left food.

2. On the 4th May Qianlong 48th Year

Weichu second quarter (1:30 p.m.)

Emperor had dinner in the Chunhuaxuan. Served with multiple color lacquered wood dining tables: one bird's nest with duck cooked by Shuang Lin, chicken and pastry cooked by Zhang Dongguan, bird's nest with chicken sclice cooked by Zheng Er, fried Chinese eggplant, a mixed plate of steamed chicken, and roasted pig

rolls, a mixed plate of Chinese chives with Dutch. Concubine Yu tributed eight dishes on three dining tables and pastries 10 on two dining tables. Silver flower box of small dished, silver plate of small dishes, dry meat, green bean water dish, eight pastries on one dining table, eight plates of meat on one dining table.

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