# Around the Globe: The Material Culture of Cantonese Round Tables in High-Qing China

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**Abstract** This chapter examines the transcultural movement and adaptation of European round tables in Chinese material culture during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Introduced by European mariners to Canton in the eighteenth century, two types of round tables—the tilt-top and gate leg tables—entered the sphere of everyday life in Guangdong Province and beyond in ways that eluded other types of furniture. Adapted to frequent mobility and space economization, foreign round tables were popular for their pragmatic character rather than their appealing aesthetics. At the same time, they were also uniquely compatible with a new trend then emerging within domestic material culture: the use of round dining tables derived from earlier forms of Chinese furniture. In their convergence, both domestic and foreign round tables partook in the formation of a new social dining practice that emphasized casualness and intimacy. In conjunction with contemporary literary practices, moreover, they aroused a new sociopolitical consciousness of equality.

Meandering through the scenes in the gallery, "Exhibition on Guangdong's History and Culture," at Guangdong Provincial Museum in Guangzhou, one encounters a well-staged traditional banquet room (Fig. 1). On a circular table made of sturdy redwood, a cornucopia of food is displayed in a typical Cantonese manner. Although Guangdong is better known for its lighthearted *yum cha*, or tea with dim sum, this configuration of dishes constitutes a ceremonial repast called *jiudagui* 九大簋, which has been offered during vernacular rituals since the Qing dynasty (1644–1911).[1] On the wall hanging behind the table, flanked by a soaring phoenix and dragon, the character *xi* 囍—meaning double happiness—is embroidered in

[1] *Gui* 簋 is a bowl-shaped ancient bronze vessel. In early modern and modern Guangdong, however, the word could denote any type of large serving dish used for formal purposes.

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**Fig. 1** A wedding banquet table, wood. Guangdong Provincial Museum, Guangzhou. Copyright: Kyoungjin Bae

lustrous gold on red silk. These symbols represent wishes for a blissful conjugal union—the sumptuous setting is a wedding banquet.

While there is nothing unusual about the scene at first glance, a closer look at the table that serves as the material setting for this conviviality raises a series of interesting questions. In premodern China, the tables used for formal banquets and casual dining were only in angular forms. At formal banquets, hosts and guests sat at

separate rectangular tables, all facing the center of the room where performances took place. During more casual gatherings, square tables nicknamed the Eight Immortals (*baxianzhuo* 八仙桌) were set up to offer various kinds of refreshments.[2] Round tables, in contrast, were virtually nonexistent as dining surfaces until the late Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Compared with the angular tables whose history goes back to ancient times, round tables began to pervade Chinese material culture only by the Qing dynasty. How, then, did a round table come to be used as a dining table in China, and what implications did this have for the dynamics of interpersonal relations while dining?

A more in-depth look at the table's morphology provides a useful way to begin addressing these questions. It is not difficult to recognize that the form of the table does not conform to that of conventional Chinese furniture. The ridged and turned legs and their structure bear a striking resemblance to that of an English gate leg table. How did this Chinese table come to take a European form? And what does it suggest that such a nonconventional table is deployed in the representation of "History and Culture" in a local museum, where the symbols of hereditary culture are crystalized in its visual and material display? Staged silently in one corner of the gallery, the banquet scene embodies a tacit assumption about the naturalization of this object in the vernacular culture of Canton, while not offering any explicit explanation for this.

This paper historicizes the use of round tables in Canton during the Qing dynasty with a particular emphasis on global connections through the international trade. It examines the popular culture surrounding the object's use and its significance in relation to changing sociocultural ideas and practices in mid-Qing society. The European round table's unique entrance to Canton and its circulation in China coincided with the emergence of indigenous round dining tables. Promoting a new mode of dining practice, the two types of tables were imbricated with a new popular interest in utility and new voices for social equality. By situating a mundane object in the complex web of its contemporary, transnational material culture, therefore, this case study brings a new perspective to the study of cross-cultural objects in the early modern world.

[2]The illustrations from the late Ming novel, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, provides good examples for both the formal and informal uses of angular tables. For detailed studies on Chinese square tables and on the material culture of Chinese banquets, see "A Square Table Where the Immortals Dine," in Sarah Handler, *Austere Luminosity of Chinese Classical Furniture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 180–202; Joanna Waley-Cohen, "The Quest for Perfect Balance: Taste and Gastronomy in Imperial China," in *Food: The History of Taste*, ed. Paul H. Freedman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 99–134.

## A Border-Crossing Object: Round Tables from British Ships to Cantonese Houses

In late seventeenth-century England, a new type of furniture came into being as tea drinking became popular among the upper and middle social strata. Called the tea table, this object was adapted to the needs of the emergent material culture. As contemporary conversation pieces attest, this material culture brought a few closely bonded friends or family members socializing in an ambient space over tea, which was often served in Chinese blue-and-white porcelain. As early as 1682, for instance, John Evelyn (1620–1706) owned a complete set of tea equipage, which comprised "tea table, [a] tea pot, [a] sugar cup and cover, tea cups, [and] six silver spoons in a case."[3] Noticeably smaller in size than a dining table, tea tables were designed to suit the intimate atmosphere of tea drinking and were constructed so that they could be folded up and stored away when teatime was over.

The English thirst for Chinese tea and porcelain created skyrocketing profits for the English East India Company's China trade. After Canton became the entrepôt for the Sino-European trade in the early eighteenth century, the trade of the East India Company gradually centered on porcelain, silk, and tea—the three most lucrative items from the Far East.[4] Although it was eclipsed by such mass products, a significant amount of furniture was also imported from China to England from the late seventeenth century. Porcelain as novelty was characterized by its exotic appearance; however, most pieces of export Chinese furniture were produced in European design. The complexity of the furniture trade stemmed from the object's twofold nature as both necessity and commodity. During the trading season, European merchants stayed at lodgings-cum-warehouses called factories, which were set up by the bank of the Pearl River near the harbor of Canton. The factories, which gradually took on a European appearance over the course of the eighteenth century, were rented from the Hong merchants and furnished with the furniture brought from home or locally procured.[5] In 1769, for instance, the English lawyer William Hickey noticed during his visit that the English factory was arranged in such

[3] *Evelyn Papers*, vol. CCXXXVII, "Inventories of goods, at Sayes Court, Wotton, and the Evelyn's London lodgings, 1663–1709," British Library, Add MS 78404, 6.

[4] Although Canton was instated by the Qing government as the official trading port only in 1757, its trade system had been developed since the late seventeenth century, and it became the de-facto central port for Western traders in the beginning of the eighteenth century.

[5] Paul van Dyke, "Rooms for Rent: Inn Keepers and the *Foreignization* of the Canton Factories 1760–1822" (paper presented at the International Conference on Private Merchants of the China Trade, 1700–1842, Guangzhou, China, November 15–17, 2013). For more information on the source of furniture in the English factory, see Kyoungjin Bae, "Joints of Utility, Crafts of Knowledge: The Material Culture of the Sino-British Furniture Trade during the Long Eighteenth Century" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2016).

a way that the merchants enjoyed tea and coffee breaks and played cards and billiards in a typical English manner.[6]

In addition to satisfying the household needs of merchants in a foreign land, European-style furniture made in Canton could also be commoditized for the home market. The records of the East India Company sales in London for a few years around 1700 offer a glimpse of the approximate scale and character of furniture importation at a relatively early stage. Between 1696 and 1697, for instance, more than 300 pieces of lacquered and solid-wood furniture from China were sold at auction.[7] They comprised a variety of types including, but not limited to, screens, tables, cabinets, chests, and trunks, and one of the most popular types of furniture was undoubtedly the tea table. In 1696, ninety-seven tea tables of various sizes were brought from China on Sarah and Dorothy, two company ships, and were sold at the December auction.[8] In the following year, 118 pieces were sold from the cargo of Fleet Friget.[9] In 1700, Macclesfield brought from China 300 nests of tea tables all inlaid with mother of pearl.[10] In 1701, the number almost tripled, with 432 pieces sold between December and April. Among them, 382 pieces were brought by Wentworth alone.[11] In 1702, 135 tea tables were sold between March 23 and 24. The entire lots sold at this auction were again brought from China by a single vessel named Dashwood.[12] It is thus obvious that around 1700 the EIC ships dispatched to China returned with loads of tables that were readily useable in tea service, that is a set of tea ware used during the tea ceremony.

A typical English tea table in the eighteenth century was a circular or square tabletop on a single pedestal. The pedestal, almost invariably sitting on a curvilinear tripod base, was joined to the top by a spring-loaded metal lock that slanted the tabletop when unlocked. This folding mechanism allowed the tables to take up minimal space while kept in storage. By virtue of their space economization, therefore, such tilt-top tables were not only used in English homes but were also carried by merchants and mariners on ships to China. Thomas Newte, a crew member of the Valentine dispatched to Canton in 1768, for instance, brought with him "a lacquer'd tea table in one case."[13]

In addition to the tilt-top table, another type of folding round table was introduced to Canton by British merchant-seafarers. Termed gate leg tables, they had become prevalent in England in the seventeenth century. A gate leg table consists of two

[6]William Hickey, *Memoirs of William Hickey*, vol. 1, ed. Alfred Spencer (London: Hurst & Blackett ltd, 1919), 207.

[7]India Office Records, British Library, IOR/B/41, 127–458.

[8]IOR/B/41, 266–321.

[9]IOR/B/41, 490, 525.

[10]Hosea Ballou Morse, *Chronicles of the East India Company: Trading to China 1635–1834*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), 97.

[11]IOR/B/43, 643–653.

[12]IOR/B/44, 90.

[13]IOR/H/18, 178.

folding side leaves that can be propped up by two supplementary legs that swing from the sides of a gate-shaped leg frame. These legs were usually turned in a spiral or ridged shape after the Dutch fashion and the table, when unfolded, became a large round or square table mostly suitable for dining. Both tilt-top tables and gate leg tables were lighter than stationary dining tables and took relatively less space when folded up; because of this they were favored by merchant-seafarers traveling on the sea, whose living space on the long, agonizing journey was confined to a small cabin. Thus, together with other space-maximizing objects, tilt-top and gate leg tables were adapted to the cabin life and became the forerunners of the so-called campaign furniture.[14]

Upon arriving at Canton, this cabin furniture was moved to the European factories and it furnished their homelike interiors. An inventory of the Dutch factory made in 1729, for instance, contained "a large dining table with a [separable] top."[15] Folding round tables such as tilt-top tables and gate leg tables continued to be used by European merchants in Canton even when their original designs became outmoded in Europe. Sources also show that they were used not only in the European factories but also in the Cantonese boats by which Europeans traveled on the local sea. William Hunter (1812–1891), purser of Russell & Co., mentions in his memoir a "fast-boat" he took in 1830 from Canton to Macao:

> The boats in which foreigners travelled to and from Macao (except occasionally if a large party, when they took chop-boats) acquired the name of inside fast boats. They were large and commodious, with cabins in which one could stand up, board raised seats on two sides, covered with clean matting, on which one slept. They were furnished with green venetian blinds. In the centre of the cabin stood the dining-table, and over it a lamp was suspended.[16]

What kind of dining table might this have been? William Prinsep (1792–1874), an English merchant who sojourned in Canton in the 1830s, left a sketch of the interior of a fast-boat he took sometime in 1838 (Fig. 2). The spacious room is fitted with Cantonese lattice panel doors on one side and half-open and half-shuttered windows on the other. In one corner of the room one can see placed a thin mattress and some bedclothes on which Prinsep himself is lying, and above it is a rolled-up mosquito net. There is but a minimal array of furniture in the cabin, comprised of a folding chair, two small boxes, a pot, and, most importantly, a gate leg table on the sunken floor in the center. The drawing roughly corresponds with Hunter's description, especially in the presence of a thin mattress, window blinds, "raised seats," and the "dining-table" in the center of the room. Such verbal and pictorial depictions of the generic cabin interior suggest a continuous use of gate leg tables for dining in the cross-cultural context of Canton during the nineteenth century.

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[14]For the development of the British campaign furniture, see Nicholas A. Brawer, *British Campaign Furniture: Elegance Under Canvas, 1740–-1914* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2011).

[15]Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie 4374, Nationaal Archief, Dagregister 1729/11/16-1730/1/2.

[16]William Hunter, *The 'Fan Kwae' at Canton Before Treaty Days, 1825–1844* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1882), 86–7.

**Fig. 2** William Prinsep, *Taking Leave of Canton with Linsey in a Fast Boat*. Pencil, pen, ink, and watercolor. 1838. Copyright: Martin Gregory

Over the course of the long eighteenth century, the continuous presence and reproduction of Western round tables in the singular material culture of the trading port facilitated the objects' cross-border movement. Evidence shows that European round tables appeared in the local environment as early as the 1740s. On the exterior of an export porcelain tea caddy are portrayed a pair of interesting images in which a European merchant and his servant are bargaining with a Chinese tea merchant attired in an official's garment (Fig. 3). The illustration of a Cantonese teashop on the export tea caddy wraps the object in a rich narrative of its origin. The scene is filled with numerous objects that provide a concrete, if not realistic, context for the narrative. The objects in the shop—such as notebooks, stationeries, a scale, a porcelain vase, and a *yixing* teapot—allude to the refined yet commercial character of the space. In the center of the room, which is furnished predominantly in Chinese taste, stands a gate leg table that serves as the stage for social and business activities. In an ensuing image, in which both parties are entertained with wine, refreshments, and smoking, the round table plays a pivotal role in generating a congenial spatiality. The juxtaposition of a gate leg table and Chinese objects in a Cantonese teashop points to the porosity of the cultural boundaries explored by the merchants who were engaged in foreign businesses. The use of such Western folding tables in Chinese shops not only allowed an efficient management of space but also left a more amiable impression on the foreigners who formed the main clientele for these businesses.

**Fig. 3** Export tea caddy. Porcelain and metal. China. c. 1740. H. 12cm. Copyright: Sotheby's

Although the image on the export tea caddy is, of course, the product of an artisan's fancy, the presence of the round table alongside other commonplace objects does suggest that round tables became entrenched in the daily rote of Cantonese shopkeepers by the early nineteenth century. The American merchant Osmond Tiffany (1823–1895) recollects his visit to an acquaintance's shop on New China Street one morning where he witnessed the shop owners dining around a "circular table":

> We pause in front of Chongshing's variety store, and observe that the shop-doors are put to, indicating that business must yield to the pleasure of eating, and that the inmates have not the

> slightest idea of being disturbed at their meals. But for once, we will violate the rules of etiquette and go in. Chongshing and his sons are about sitting down to a circular table, and do not seem disposed to pay us much attention. We hear a sound of something hissing, and presently a servant from the back room brings in half a dozen or more bowls filled with hot boiled rice, or fish prepared in some simple way, or vegetables; tea is served in little cups; the chopsticks are pulled from their cases; and the battle begins.[17]

Tiffany's portrayal suggests that the locals were using round tables as practical objects. The hint at a rushed meal during busy business hours, the unassuming presentation of simple dishes, and most of all, the analogy between eating and "battle" all reveal the pragmatic connotations of the "circular table" in the everyday material culture of Canton.

Western round tables not only permeated the commercial district but also eventually penetrated the vernacular lifestyle. A mid-nineteenth century photograph currently kept at the Royal Society of Asian Affairs and taken by Scottish photographer John Thomson (1837–1921) during his trip to China in the late 1860s captures a gate leg table used as a game table by the Buddhist monks at the Temple of the Five Hundred Gods (*hualinsi* 華林寺) in Canton. In the town's oldest temple, a group of monks are shown sitting around a round table playing "Go" in the terrace outside a pavilion. The distinctively turned legs as well as their hexagonal disposition speak to the prototype of this object. Although this is from a slightly later period, the photo attests to the fact that European tables were firmly anchored in the nitty-gritty of daily activities by the mid-nineteenth century.

From the perspective of the broader cross-cultural movement of objects from Europe to China, the round table's frictionless settlement in Cantonese daily life proves extraordinary. Although Cantonese people, apart from the Qing court, welcomed in general Western curios and technology with alacrity, such a tendency was largely limited to formerly unknown objects such as magnifying lenses, watches, or alarm clocks. On the other hand, most types of European furniture, despite their long-term presence in Canton's trading port, did not cross the cultural boundary to enter domestic society until after the Opium War. The adaptation of European tilt-top and gate leg tables in high Qing Cantonese society was thus anything but natural.

## The Material Culture of Round Dining Tables in Qing China

The story of Cantonese round tables is much more complex than a narrative in which an introduced object finds a niche market or replaces an outmoded antecedent. Its popularity in the region was not just connected to foreign trade but also interwoven with broader changes in the material culture of eighteenth-century China. When the European tables arrived at Canton, Chinese people were already increasingly

[17]Osmond Tiffany, *The Canton Chinese; or The American's Sojourn in the Celestial Empire* (Boston: J. Munroe & Co, 1849), 66.

adapting to dining at round tables. Although records show that tables of a circular shape were used as kitchen appliances and by street peddlers selling wares as early as the Song dynasty, the use of round tables in ways comparable with that of angular ones—especially for purposes of leisure and consumption—appeared only in the early Qing dynasty.[18] Although it is difficult to know exactly when round tables came to be used for dining in the Qing dynasty, their visual representation was already perceptible by the early eighteenth century.

Based on their morphology, the Qing round tables can be divided into two forms. One of them originated from the traditional furniture while the other was introduced from overseas. The major difference between indigenous and foreign round tables can be found in the base structure. If tilt-top tables had one pedestal and gate leg tables relied on a sliding-door mechanism, the indigenous round tables were characterized by plural supporting legs. Moreover, the bottom structure of the former was ostensibly curved or turned, while that of the latter had a straight form. Indigenous tables, in their basic composition, had a round tabletop supported by six to eight legs, which were sometimes rejoined by way of a stretcher at the bottom (Fig. 4).[19] Although this was a novel form as a table, it had some historical prototypes in the preceding Ming dynasty. One of them can be found in the furniture glossary of the fifteenth-century carpentry manual, *Lu Ban jing* 魯班經 (*The Classic of Lu Ban*). The fifteenth type (*shi* 式) of the glossary is titled "round table (*yuanzhuo* 圓桌)," yet it in effect describes a pair of semicircular tables that, when combined, formed a round shape.[20] Dubbed in Chinese a crescent table (*yueyazhuo* 月牙桌), such semi-round tables were used individually as side tables, and were often placed against the wall to hold flower vases or other decorative objects. A crescent table usually had four to six thin straight legs. Some early Qing round tables directly inherited such features, the only difference being that they were now made in a complete circular form. Thus, it is likely that Qing round tables emerged as the descendants of Ming precedents around the dynastic transition in the late seventeenth to early eighteenth century.[21]

Evidence for the construction of such tables can be found as early as 1730 in the palace. On the seventeenth day of the second month, for instance, the Yongzheng emperor (r. 1722–1735) ordered the imperial furniture workshops to make "a round table in *zitan* wood (purple sandalwood), of which the diameter should be two *chi*

[18]A peddler's portable circular table, for instance, appears on the famous Song dynasty painting, "Along the River during the Qingming Festival (*Qingming shang he tu*)."

[19]Based on this basic form, the specific designs vary, ranging from straight to curved legs, waisted to recessed leg-structures, and from simple to complex stretcher joining.

[20]For details, see Wang Shixiang's 王世襄 annotation on the round table of *Lu Ban jing*. Wang Shixiang 王世襄, *Mingshi jiaju yanjiu* 明式家具研究 (*A Study of Ming Style Furniture*), vol. 1 (Hong Kong: Shanglian shudian youxian gongsi, 1989), 207.

[21]The other important prototype for the Qing round tables was the Ming incense stand. In early modern China, incense burners were often elevated individually on a high stand made of a round top, high waist, cabriole legs, and a base stretcher or stand. If such was used as a side stand until the Ming dynasty, the same form developed to be a regular-size table in the Qing dynasty.

**Fig. 4** A semicircular or crescent table, wood. Guangdong Folk Art Museum, Guangzhou. Copyright: Kyoungjin Bae

and six *cun*, and the height nine *cun*." He then added an instruction to "Make the legs straight."[22] Although the specific design of this table does not survive, the

[22]Orig. "二月十七日据圓明園來帖內稱,郎中海望奉旨, 照做紫檀木圓桌一張, 經二尺五寸, 高九寸, 腿子做直的." Zhu Jiajin 朱家溍, ed., *Yangxindian zaobanchu shiliao jilan* 养心殿造办处史料辑览 (*Compiled Sources from the Imperial Palace Workshops*) (Beijing: Zijin cheng chubanshe, 2003), 201.

instruction regarding the legs implies that the object would have been a round table in the shape of two combined crescent tables. Some early to mid-eighteenth-century woodblock prints produced in the town of Yangliu in Hubei province for the Chinese New Year provide the details of such round tables with straight legs.[23]

When European round tables were introduced to China in the early eighteenth century, therefore, they were new but not novel: new in their space-economizing design and their use for eating, but not novel, since the Chinese were becoming familiar with the newly developed forms of round tables. It was serendipitous for the newcomers that the cultural authority of the domestic round tables was still under construction. By the eighteenth century, as will be shown, reconfiguring and re-hierarchizing the material and social orders was already under way through the use of the round tables, and it was easy for European round tables to cross the cultural border and partake in the formation of the object's identity. Throughout their dissemination, therefore, the foreign round tables maintained a symbiotic relationship with their domestic counterparts. They promoted the utility of the table and this in turn produced a new practice and cultural metonymy surrounding the material culture of the round table. Like their Ming precedents, the early round tables were primarily used for displaying decorative objects. In the second half of the eighteenth century, however, this exhibitory function was gradually superseded by the more practical activity of dining. In the famous mid-eighteenth-century novel *Hong lou meng* 紅樓夢 (*Dream of the Red Chamber*), for instance, there are several scenes in which round tables are discussed in relation to the recreational activities accompanied by food and wine. In Chapter 38, after the sumptuous crabmeat party in the garden with Grandmother Jia, the protagonist Jia Baoyu proposes that his cousins and friends gather around a round table to drink, eat, and compose poems:

> When [Xiangyun and Baochai] were back again, they ordered servants to clear the seats and arrange a new table. Baoyu, however, said, "No, don't set a new table. We are about to get on with poems. Set out the large round-reunion table (*datuanyuan zhuozi* 大團圓桌子) in the center [of the pavilion] and place all the food and wine on it. We don't have to assign seats; instead, we can help ourselves while sitting wherever we like. Would it be much more suitable?" "That is right," Baochai replied. [...] After a while, they called for another lot of hot crabmeats and ate them around the large round-reunion table.[24]

Perhaps the oldest historical evidence available today regarding the use of a round dining table in China, this passage in *Dream of the Red Chamber* is significant on several grounds. First, it provides a physical context in which a round table was used: in the garden. Indeed, round tables were used as much outdoors as indoors. They

[23]For more information on the Yangliu prints, see Wang Shucun 王树村, ed., *Yangliu qingnian hua ziliao ji* 杨柳青年画资料集 (*Source Book of the Yangliu New Year Painting*) (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1959).

[24]Orig. "二人忙應著, 送出園外,仍舊回來,命將殘席收拾了另擺。寶玉道 "也不用擺,偺們且做詩,把那大團圓桌子放在當中,酒菜都放著,也不必拘定坐位,有愛喫的去喫,大家散坐,豈不便宜?" 寶釵道 "這話極是." [...] 因又命令擺一桌,揀了熱螃蟹來[...]一處共坐." Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹, *Hong lou meng* 紅楼夢 (*Dream of the Red Chamber*), vol. 1 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1982), 520–1.

were set up whenever it was necessary to provide seats and refreshments in the garden or at a picnic, and then dismantled, carried back, and stored away when the outing was done. Round tables were considered particularly appropriate for outdoor activities during holidays such as the Lantern Festival and the Mid-Autumn Festival when the full moon was worshipped. Round tables used for this purpose were seldom fancy; they were made of secondary woods and designed in such a way that they could be easily put together and broken down. In this regard, round tables served the purpose of provisionality much more efficiently than square tables.

Second, the spatiality created by the round table produced a sense of equality among those who gathered. This was the most notable difference between round and angular tables. At an angular table, as custom demanded, the main guests or senior family members should be seated in the center facing the south, and the rest of the seats were assigned in accordance with the individual's social, familial, and gender relation to the person of honor. A circular table, in contrast, allowed a much more flexible seating, as Baoyu's casualness expressed in his comments: "sitting wherever we like."

By the time this new type of table became widespread in the late eighteenth century, the tension between the old and new premises that underpinned different modes of social relations at dining even attracted some literati interest. In his poem titled "Round Table (*Yuanzhuo*)," Qian Daxin 錢大昕 (1728–1804), who served as the commissioner of education in Guangdong province, favorably valorized the new object:

I still remember the Eight Immortals gathered at the Jade Terrace.
Yet, who transmitted the ambiguous new shape [of this object]?
Trimming the lantern with sincere joy, we reunite and chat.
Offering seats, either left or right is fine—in rotation.
Moving [the table] to the courtyard, heaven is like a bamboo hat.
When halved, the table resembles the crescent moon.
The gourd-like cottage rather suits your humbleness.
Aosou (聱叟), from now on, do not harbor hatred for the round.[25]

The poem depicts a scene in which people are gathered around a round table perhaps to prepare lanterns for the Lantern Festival. The poet describes the round table as a new object whose "ambiguous shape" has been "transmitted" from somewhere unknown, suggesting its novelty by his time. The round table is characterized as an object suitable for a festive reunion and for a reciprocal, non-hierarchic relationship. It is also adapted to mobility, and unlike the square tables, or "the Eight Immortals," it is an unassuming object of modesty. This notion is reinforced by the

[25]Orig. "曾記瑤臺聚八仙/ 模棱新樣阿誰傳/ 翦鐙真快團圞話/ 讓坐無妨左右旋/ 移到中庭天似笠/ 分張半面月初弦/ 瓜廬與爾差相稱/ 聱叟從今莫惡圓." Qian Daxin 錢大昕, *Qianyan tang ji* 潛研堂集 (*Collected Writings at the Hall of Secret Studies*) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2010), 592.

reference to Aosou, the style name of the famous Tang dynasty scholar-official Yuan Jie 元結 (723–772). According to *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 (*The New Book of Tang*), after moving to Fanshang, Yuan mingled with fishermen neighbors and gamed with the old and the young, who called him by the sobriquet of Aosou.[26] Connecting Yuan's egalitarian life with the figure of the round, therefore, Qian projects a strong political connotation onto this new material form and the practices associated with it.

A round table was thus associated with the ideas of reciprocity, intimacy, mobility, and the moon, as well as reunion. Such discrete ideas were concatenated in the composite entity of *tuanyuan* 團圓, a concept that was deeply rooted in the material culture of premodern China. *Tuanyuan*—a word whose etymology goes back to the Tang dynasty (618–907)—can be translated into a wide range of English words including round, reunion, completion, and repleteness. For instance, a felicitous denouement of a story was called *datuanyuan* 大團圓—literally, the grand finale.[27] Family gatherings during the major holidays such as the Spring Festival and the Mid-Autumn Festival were also called *tuanyuan*, which denoted not only the act of reunion but also its materiality—the special culinary, ritual, and recreational activities associated with the festivity. Simultaneously, *tuanyuan* stood for roundness in relation to, but not confined to, the shape of the moon.[28] These seemingly unrelated meanings converged on the semantic token of the round to create a complex set of cultural metonymies.[29]

During the Qing dynasty, round tables came to materially epitomize the multifaceted notion of *tuanyuan*. Hence, Baoyu referred to it as a large *tuanyuan* table—rather than just a round (*yuan* 圓) table—which suggests that the round and reunion are almost synonymous. Moreover, this set of imbricated meanings was also linked to a specific temporal and seasonal concern. In the writing of Kong Shangren 孔尚任 (1748–1718), a dramatist and poet who preceded Cao by half a century, round tables function as literary tropes related to the Mid-Autumn moon. In his *Jiexu tongfeng lu* 節序同風錄 (*Records of the Same Customs through Seasons*), Kong outlines the

[26]Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修, *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 (*The New Book of Tang*), Yingyin wenyuange Siku quanshu edition (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1983), *juan* 143, 8b.

[27]Wei Lei 危磊, "'Datuanyuan' shenmei xin li chengyin xintan "大团圆"审美心理成因新探 (Revisiting the Psychological Causes for the Aesthetics of Denouement)," *Wenxue pinglun* 3 (2002): 153–9.

[28]Meng Zhaoshui 孟昭水 has elaborated cultural associations of round in relation to Chinese holidays, see: Meng Zhaoshui 孟昭水, "Zhongguo chuantong jieri minsu zhong de fangyuan zhuti 中国传统节日民俗中的方圆主题 (On the Subject of Square and Round in Chinese Traditional Holiday Customs)," *Heilongjiang shehui kexue* 3 (2006): 106–8.

[29]For a detailed discussion of the cultural connotation of the round in premodern China, see: Ye Jingsong 叶劲松, "Lun Zhongguo gudai fangyuan zaowu guan 论中国古代方圆造物观 (A Discussion of the Cosmology of Square and Round in Ancient China)," *Hubei jingji xueyuan xuebao* 5 (May 2008): 27–8.

**Fig. 5** Gao Yinzhang (1835–1907), *Offerings to the Full Moon*. Yangliu New Year's Print. Ink and watercolor. Tianjin Museum, Tianjin. Copyright: Tianjin Museum

Mid-Autumn moon offering, saying, "Set up a round table (*yuanji* 圓几) in the courtyard. On top of the table, arrange mooncakes, grapes, pomegranates, persimmons, chestnuts, lotus roots, taros, and oranges. Make an offering to the moon and pray for longevity. [. . .] When I sit on the *tuanyuan* table, the center of the table is inlaid with an image of the moon palace."[30]

A similar example is found in another episode in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, where the Jia family gathers in the Prospect Hall to make offerings to the moon on the Mid-Autumn night. The offerings consist of moonlike melons and mooncakes. After burning incenses and paying rituals, the family, at the request of Grandmother Jia, climbs the hill to appreciate the full moon. When they arrive at the top, the servants have "arranged [two] tables and chairs in the terrace of a pavilion. [. . .] All the tables and chairs were prepared round in order to achieve the meaning of *tuanyuan*."[31] Here, *tuanyuan* is a twofold token that stands for both family reunion and the postharvest celebration represented by the full moon. The round ritual objects—fruit, mooncakes, round tables and chairs—constitute the materiality of *tuanyuan* alongside the bodies, which are themselves aligned in a circular form.

A parallel idea is embodied in a Yangliu print made by the late Qing artist Gao Yinzhang 高蔭章 (1835–1907). The image shows a specific moment of the moon offering during the Mid-Autumn night (Fig. 5). In a private courtyard under the full moon, two boys are learning about the offering rituals from an adult woman. In front

[30]Orig. "設圓几於中庭陳月餅葡萄石榴瓜柿栗藕芋橙橘對月[…]坐團圓桌臺桌心嵌月宮圖." Kong Shangren 孔尚任, "Jiexu tongfeng lu 節序同風錄 (Records of the Same Customs through Seasons)," *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu: shi bu* 165 (1997): 847.

[31]Cao, *Hong lou meng*, vol. 2, 1075–6.

of them is placed a tilt-top tripod table inlaid with a white stone; on the table are mooncakes, dumplings, and fruits, together with candles and an incense burner. Next to the moon is an inscription titled *Offering to the Full Moon*, of which the first stanza reads: "At the age of fifteen I learn about the moon offering, and on the night of the fifteenth I make a moon offering. My mind naturally cherishes the round moon; how could I ever wish to marry early?"[32] Such images demonstrate that over the century following its introduction, the foreign round table was woven into the matrix of cultural semiotics in premodern China. In addition to becoming ingrained in everyday life, round tables became tethered to enduring sets of cultural practices associated with tradition.

It is within these broad synchronic and diachronic contexts of domestic material culture that the prevalence of European round tables should be understood. When European round tables made their way into the everyday life of the Chinese, therefore, their form and function were readily congenial to the metaphor of *tuanyuan*. The exceptional case of the early adaptation of this object was, however, not a harbinger of a yet-to-come modern, Westernized lifestyle in China. Rather, it is best understood in terms of the foreign round table's timely arrival when emergent forms of indigenous round tables were still taking shape and finding a niche in the Qing cultural environment. Since they shared not only the form but also the same mechanical attributes, the two types of round tables were used to incubate the same social and cultural aspirations. Regardless of their provenances, the two groups of round tables shared some functional advantages over conventional tables. As the tabletop could be removed or the whole piece could be halved, the indigenous round tables could be made lighter and smaller, which made them easier to maneuver. Such space-economization was an important characteristic of the premodern round table, for it was fundamentally an occasional table mobilized for the temporary purposes of dining and entertaining—one that never reached the status of the angular tables that were stationed with formality in parlors.[33]

The European round tables, as mentioned above, possessed similar attributes. Originally functioning as cabin furniture, they were designed to be space-saving and readily portable. The tilt-top and gate leg tables found in historic houses in the Guangdong region are exhibited and stored in a similar manner as their domestic counterparts, either folded against the wall or laid in dining rooms. They are also made of inferior materials such as secondary redwood (called locally *suanzhi* 酸枝) or other miscellaneous woods whose moderate value justified the objects' extensive wear from continuous exposure to external weather and kitchen humidity. Seen from the perspective of utility, the tilt-top and gate leg tables had a different character from such popular European novelties as magnifying glasses or chime clocks. Round

[32]Orig. "十五學拜月, 拜月十五夜, 心自重月圓, 何嘗願早嫁."

[33]In the Republican period (1912–1949), however, Cantonese people began to furnish their reception halls with exquisitely carved and inlaid round tables. Yet this happened after, or during, the major transformation in household material culture that took place in modernizing Canton around the turn of the twentieth century.

tables were favored by the Chinese primarily by virtue of their pragmatic properties and their conformity to the existing material syntax. It was thus not an interest in foreign novelty but the pursuit of utilitarian comfort that facilitated the early accommodation of European round tables in the vernacular material culture.

Despite their preeminence in visual representations and material environments, tilt-top and gate leg tables went largely unnoticed in contemporary textual sources. As in the case of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century stories and essays refer only to the general appellation, "the round table," when necessary: in other words, insofar as these objects partake in the human actions that need to be described. This pragmatic attitude toward furniture was already present in the famous playwright Li Yu's 李漁 (1610–1680) account of furniture in his *Xianqing ouji* 闲情偶寄 (*Sketches of Idle Pleasures*). Although his interest is largely limited to classical studio furniture, Li is more concerned with practicality than presentability. Concerning the tables (*ji'an* 几案), for instance, he emphasizes such elements as drawers for space organization, a separate board as a protective accessory, and wooden pegs for leveling the table. Li views the additional board as particularly useful in the winter when one cannot do without a brazier under the seat: "If the heat from the brazier reaches the tabletop above it, its wooden panel will eventually crack. Thus, one must prevent this in advance. When the weather is not yet cold, prepare a separate board that can be easily installed and dismantled. One can line it underneath the tabletop or hang it with strings or hooks. Otherwise, one can have clamps (*jigou* 機彀) preinstalled at the time of manufacture and use them instead [of strings or hooks]. Use the board to absorb the heat and change it when it gets scorched. This method is inexpensive."[34] Li's pragmatic perspective was drastically different from the connoisseurial approach that prevailed in the preceding literary discourses on furniture, which are exemplified by Wen Zhengheng's 文震亨 (1585–1645) *Zhangwu zhi* 長物志 (*Treatises on Superfluous Things*).

The round tables of the Qing dynasty were subject to similar pragmatic diagnoses rather than aesthetic evaluation—particularly because of their permeation into the lives of a broad spectrum of social bodies—and thus they received little attention as a subject of appreciation.

Since they were first and foremost governed by a utilitarian interest, it was less significant after all whether they had four or eight legs, or if they were made in conventional or unfamiliar designs. Such a utilitarian attitude enabled a seamless settling of European tables in Cantonese, and further Chinese, material culture. Moreover, this de-aestheticized view toward furniture ironically allowed such objects to preserve their original form and resist morphological adaptation throughout their extensive dissemination in a broad array of Chinese regions. Indeed, the depictions of tilt-top and gate leg tables found in the export paintings made in Canton, in Yangliu prints from near Tianjin, and even in the late nineteenth-century photographs taken in Shanghai all share the same traits of their original design: the

[34]Li Yu 李漁, *Xianqing ouji* 閑情偶寄 (*Sketches of Idle Pleasures*) (Beijing: Zhonghua shudian, 2007), 92.

uniquely turned legs or the cariole tripod carved into scroll forms. As a result of such a de-aestheticized and utilitarian attitude, therefore, the tilt-top and gate leg tables became rather unique examples of the transcultural movement of objects, in which the object became successfully adapted to the local soil without going through the process of localization. From this perspective, the round table, keeping its originality and receiving equal hospitality throughout its global travel, was truly an EurAsian object.

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