



## THE CHINESE SCREENS IN THE COLLECTION OF THE NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM IN PRAGUE SOME FUNCTIONAL AND AESTHETIC ASPECTS

Laura OTTAVIANI-JAEDE

The screens studied in the present paper constitute an heterogeneous group, which offers a considerable variety in style, technique, size, themes and period of manufacture. Therefore they represent a wide sample of the production of screens for the Chinese market as well as for the foreign, which stretched over the first 150 years of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). The study of style and taste evolution runs parallel to the study of their thematic representations and techniques. Nonetheless the screen format is not considered in this paper as a secondary topic, but as medium of structural and decorative functions.<sup>1</sup>

The screen is one of the oldest and most common piece of furniture in China and beside porcelain one of the most significant imported ware during the European Baroque time. Its use in China is dated back to the first millennium B. C.<sup>2</sup> Literary as well as pictorial sources are not only pieces of evidence of the employment of screens in ancient time but they highlight also the screen's function and aesthetic.

*Pingfeng* or "wind-shelter" is the general term to mean screens throughout the Song (960–1279) and Yuan (1279–1368) dynasties,<sup>3</sup> however it is not yet fully researched how singular kinds of screens were called earlier<sup>4</sup>. Up to the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) the term *pingfeng* was used for stationary screens, which were settled on a base (also called *zuopingfeng*.<sup>5</sup> This type has three or five folds and a peculiar form: the middle fold is higher than the others. It was settled in big halls and also behind a throne. The *weiping* or

<sup>1</sup> The following introductory information about symbolic and decorative functions of Chinese screen from the Zhou dynasty (1100/256 B. C.) up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century is based on the exhaustive study of Prof. Wu Hung: *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting*, Chicago 1996

<sup>2</sup> For references see *ibid.* pp 11–12

<sup>3</sup> See Wang Shixiang: *Connoisseurship of Chinese Furniture – Ming and Early Qing Dynasties*, Hong Kong 1990, Vol. I, p. 89

<sup>4</sup> Compare Sullivan Michael: *Notes on Early Chinese Screen Painting*, in: *Artibus Asiae*, XXVII (1965), pp. 239–254, p. 239

<sup>5</sup> The explanation of the Chinese terms for screens and are lifted out Wang op. cit., pp. 89–92

“winged screen” refers to a fold screen which has not got a base for support, hence it was settled in a zig-zag shape. Metal strips connect the folds. The single-panel screen – the so called *yanzhang* or “table plaque” set on a support – belongs, with both over mentioned kinds, to the oldest and most common screens type.<sup>6</sup> The group of screens examined on this paper comprehends all of three kinds, the most frequent being the *weiping*.

Since the beginning of the Zhou dynasty (1100/256 B. C.) the screen has assumed beside the practical function also an aesthetic and symbolic role, which has allowed the screen to fit and to survive cultural and social changes over three thousand years. The strength of its adaptability dwells in two important structural and aesthetic factors which are strictly connected and subordinated to each other. A screen divides and contemporaneously defines rooms in spaces,<sup>7</sup> which through the decorative motifs get their proper identity. Moreover the screen protects these spaces creating privacy.<sup>8</sup>

During the period going from the Zhou to the Han (206 B. C.–220 A. D.) dynasties the screen assumes a political role, defines the authority and the social status of the owner who is surrounded or backed by it.<sup>9</sup> The screens’ decorative patterns represent his social position, they declare and enlarge his authority. In this phase the screen is not considered as an independent art object, but as complement of the social identity of the owner.<sup>10</sup> This matches the *zuopingfeng* – set behind the throne to remark the authority of the king and later of the emperor – as well as the *yanzhang* and the *weiping* – as seen on mural fresco of the Han tombs which defines the owner’s place.

In the course of the Han dynasty the screen has slowly arisen as an art object and beside mural frescoes has been the most used painting surface.<sup>11</sup> Up to the Song dynasty (960–1279) the themes of screen decoration have been identical with those of the contemporary painting on scrolls.<sup>12</sup> The oldest remaining screens are made of wood covered with a coat of lacquer, which has preserved them over almost two thousand years;<sup>13</sup> while the oldest example of screen on paper and ramie cloth mounted on wood is dated back to the eighth century.<sup>14</sup>

The production of lacquer screens spread during the fifth century, fitting the large de-

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<sup>6</sup> A *zuopingfeng* is first mentioned in *Li Chi* “Book of Rites”, trans. James Legge, New York 1967, II, pp. 29–31; reference lifted out Wu op. cit. footnote 5. It is there settled behind the emperor’s throne. The *weiping* is first mentioned as a winged screen enclosing a bed or a couch, in *Hanshu: Chen Wannian-zhuan* (History of Han: Biography of Chen Wannian) quoted by Yi Shui: *Mantan pingfeng Ji-aju tanwang zhiyi*, (General Talk about Fold Screens – One discussed Piece of Furniture), Wenwu, Nov. 1979, pp. 74–79, p. 74; literary sources are given on footnote 1. An archaeological evidence of the *yanzhang* type has been discovered in the Tomb n.1 of *Mawangdui*, Changsha province, dating 169 BC. For further kinds of screen and for a comparison of terms see Sullivan op. cit., p. 239 ff.

<sup>7</sup> See Wu op. cit., p. 10 ff.

<sup>8</sup> See Yi op. cit. p. 78

<sup>9</sup> The decorative patterns of the screens of that early time reproduce the motifs which embellished the ritual objects and clothes of the owner. See Wu op. cit. p. 11 ff. and p. 13–14

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 13 ff.

<sup>11</sup> See Wu op. cit., p. 15

<sup>12</sup> See Yi op. cit., p. 77. A clear evidence of the closed correspondence between screen and scroll medium is the interchangeable remounting of screen paintings into scrolls; see Wu op. cit. p. 26, p. 101; Sullivan op. cit., p. 251–252

<sup>13</sup> As far as known the oldest lacquer screen is that found at the Tomb n.1 of *Mawangdui*, see Wu op. cit. p. 13, and ill. 5

<sup>14</sup> A six fold screen now in Shosoin Treasure House is dated 752 AD, ink, colour and bird features on paper and ramie cloth, illustrated in Wu op. cit. p. 100; on footnote 122 are references about further studies concerning this screen. See also Yi op. cit. p. 77

mand of the military class of Northern Wei (386–535) for durable luxury goods.<sup>15</sup> Thereafter the high costs of manufacture of lacquer and the frequent advice to the gentry to adapt their moral attitude to the Confucian virtues of modesty and frugality made increase the production of screens whose wood body was covered by simply decorated paper or silk.<sup>16</sup> Since the Wei dynasty the screens are beloved gifts for *Maojie* or “court officials”, anticipating a fashion, which will boom from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in China. An inscription reported by Yi Shui in his mentioned study reveals the meaning of that kind of gift: “When a gentleman has a screen of ancients, he is consequently rewarded with the garments of ancients”.<sup>17</sup> Therefore the screen acquired a further characteristic, which stressed its similarity to painting scrolls, it became the expression of cultural refinement and essential complement of a distinguished class. From that point screens are quite often represented on painting scrolls with the purpose to mirror the cultural environment of the person represented and to allude discretely to his thoughts and feelings.<sup>18</sup>

During the Tang dynasty (618–906) the habit of setting a big screen at the reception hall favoured the increase of the use of screens as well as their size. With the development of the multi-panel (six or eight panels) screens the aesthetic and the function of screens acquired features which made them closer to wall paintings.<sup>19</sup>

The high demand of production of screens was satisfied by a less expensive and faster making ware, like wood screens decorated with plain paper or with poems.<sup>20</sup> This kind of screen fulfilled the Confucian admonishment for objects of simple aesthetic. During the Song time (960–1279), especially screens with landscape painting assumed the representative function of mirroring the feelings and the thoughts of the literati<sup>21</sup> as well as a scroll painting could do. Thus up to the Song dynasty the screen combines the broad decorative effect and the illustrative function of a wall painting with the communicative function of a scroll painting.<sup>22</sup> But thereafter, under the influence of the *wenrenhua* or “literati’s painting” the more intimate scroll format was preferred and the screen production developed as a branch of decorative art.

The increasing influence of the middle-class culture gave a new impulse to the production of screens, thus from about the end of the Ming dynasty the screen recovered the representative role of social status. Screens decorated with congratulating inscriptions and poems<sup>23</sup> as well as with figure scenes, “birds and flowers”, and framed by panels embellished with auspicious objects and animals, became the favourite gift for officials, dignitaries, teachers as well as for their brides presented in occasion of birthday, retirement from

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<sup>15</sup> See Yi op. cit., p. 77

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 77

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 77, Yi quotes the Chinese source on footnote 15 : *Sanguozhi: Weishu, Maojie-zhuan* (Records of the three Kingdoms: Book of Wei – Biography of Court Officials)

<sup>18</sup> More about the metaphoric meaning of the screen in paintings as well as its structural function see Wu op. cit pp 10–11, p. 15 ff. and p.134 ff.

<sup>19</sup> For the dating of the multi-panel screens see Sullivan op. cit., p. 242, p. 245, p. 249; for the resembling to wall painting ibid. p. 251

<sup>20</sup> *Shuping* or “screens with calligraphy” have been very popular since the Tang dynasty and later on for several centuries; a first evidence of *shuping* is on mural painting of the Cave 103 of Dunhuang, a screen decorated with a text is set behind a Vimalakirti figure; reference Sullivan, op. cit., pp. 242–243.

<sup>21</sup> See Wu op. cit., p. 149

<sup>22</sup> Sullivan op. cit., p. 253

<sup>23</sup> Adams Woodbury Janet: *Decorative folding screens in the West from 1600 to the Present Day*, London 1982, p. 20;

official career or award of some title. This kind of congratulation screen was in fashion in China for at least one hundred years. From the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century its popularity declined and the screen kept on in China only its decorative and practical functions losing definitely its strong social representative role.

The so called congratulation screen is the most appreciated Chinese screen in Europe, it has been imported since the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century<sup>24</sup> and reached its zenith of popularity at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>25</sup> The European interest for screens of that period is probably connected with their decorative and narrative aspects.

The screen format was already known in Europe but has not found as large a use as in China.<sup>26</sup> The high polished surface of the lacquer screens surely suggested European nobles and merchants the feeling of luxury, the colourful decoration enchanted them, and the meticulous representation of the life and festivals of Chinese people aroused their curiosity. The European demand for screens spread in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to such an extent, that Chinese manufactures could not satisfy it completely and then started to neglect the products quality. Pushed by the short times of delivery Chinese artisans developed and applied simpler and less expensive techniques. Willing to match the foreign taste they worked under aesthetic principles and decorative patterns which did not belong to their domestic tradition. Consequently they created a new genre of manufacture product which became gradually estranged from its own cultural roots.

The Chinese screens in European courts were exposed at the beginning of the Chinoiserie fashion (second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century) in the sitting room to enrich the collections of exotica. Later they were cut and mounted as cabinets or used to panel walls. Through the European rework the screen lost completely its basic functions of shelter and rooms divider, it thus became decoration's material fitting the European need of cultural and fashion inspiration from an ideal world. The screens in the modern Museums collections have recovered their dignity and in their restored integrity are able to create the proper place for an aesthetic understanding.

A feeling of respect for royal authority arouses at the view of the five folds screen (ill. 1, inventory n. 29050); height of the middle panels comprehensive of openwork decoration 315 cm.; width 315 cm.) and the throne (height 33; width 104; depth 21) of illustration 1. They constitute a set which can be dated back to the end of the 17<sup>th</sup>, beginning of 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>27</sup> The throne and the screen's frame are made of lacquered wood, embellished with carved and openwork decoration. The throne is very simply decorated with a key-fret of stylised leaves and with a *lingzhi*<sup>28</sup> or "long-life fungus" scroll on the front part. The back panel of the throne is embellished by a single *lingzhi* fungus pattern on the upper border.

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<sup>24</sup> The inscriptions on the screens provide us with several information about the year of presentation of the gift, the occasion of presentation and other personal details of the celebrated. Sometime a list of participants to the party is added at the end of the inscription

<sup>58</sup> The first records about screens date back to the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, see Hugh Honour: *Chinoiserie the Vision of Cathai*, London 1961, p. 43

<sup>26</sup> 1700 the French ship *Amphitrite* transported back to Europe 36 screens, During 1701–1703 it has travelled twice to China bringing back 45 screens, see Belevitch-Stankevitsh Helene: *Le gout chinois en France au tempe de Louis XIV*. Paris 1910, p. 62, p. 67

<sup>27</sup> Sparely used since the 15<sup>th</sup> century to shelter the dining room from the kitchen and repair from cold air, screens proliferate in England since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, see Adams op. cit., London 1982, p. 65. In France the use of *eperon* dates back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, *ibid.* p.69. Fold screens have been used since the 16<sup>th</sup> century in France; *ibid.* p. 72

<sup>28</sup> The stylistic execution of the *chi* dragons on the openwork spandrels is similar to works on Chinese furniture made at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, see Beurdeley Michel: *Chinesische Möbel*, Tübingen

The whole representative function is expressed by the screen which makes an imposing impression through the lobed panels and the fine openwork spandrels decorated with *chi*-dragons. The screen is settled on a three-partied wood stand (height 46 cm; width of the tree parts 71 cm, 165 cm, 71 cm), which is embellished with a carved decoration of flowers. The five folds are of different size (decreasing to the sides; width 47 cm, 53 cm, 63 cm). They are divided into three decorative panels, which are enclosed by wood frames carved with a fret of bats among clouds. On the central panels the "Birds and Flowers" theme is depicted with colours on silk. The upper panels are lobed and decorated similarly by one flying crane. The lower panels are of rectangular shape and embellished with the motif of a standing crane among flowers. The central fold is emphasized by the depicted motif of phoenix couple with peonies on the middle panel, of sun among waves on the top panel, and of four bats with a decorative stone on the bottom. The birds painted on the middle panels are of the kind representing well known virtues and qualities of nobles and gentlemen: the peacock symbolises refinement and elegance, the ducks couple fidelity and frugality, the falcon courage and determination, the phoenix royalty and capability to administrate the justice therefore to guarantee peace, the pheasant as well as long feathered birds are symbols of high rank officials. The repeated motif of bats among clouds on the frames expresses the wish of long life, which is stressed by the presence of cranes and of the long-life fungus among other good auspicious plants.

This kind of decoration was generally considered good omen and has been commonly used to embellish gifts presented on special occasions. Although the painting has been well executed in delicate colour tones (red, green, blue, light blue, white and brown) and with fine lines it results a little stereotyped and rigid, it could be a work of a court painter for the audience hall of a Manchu prince.

A convincing impression of preciousness and luxury makes the one-panel screen (ill. 2, inventory n. A 26 555; height 160 cm, width 150 cm; originally stand on a 25 cm high foot made of wood) in "carved polychrome lacquer" (*ticaiqi*). The picturesque contrast between the dark green lacquer bottom carved with diaper pattern for water, the red carved lacquer representing the land, the blue sky, and the yellow tone at the horizon creates a colourful scene. The application of "carved polychrome lacquer" technique was promoted under the reign of emperor Qian Long (1736–1796) because of its decorative feature, founding inspiration from lacquer works made in the Jiajing (1522–1566) era.

The one-panel screen in the Chinese collection of Náprstek Museum presents stylistic similarities with a memorial panel which was commissioned to commemorate the suppression of a rebels uprising in 1776 in Sichuan.<sup>29</sup> Several technical and stylistic features as the carving of the rocks reminding the strokes texture in painting, the *lingzhi* fungus shape of the clouds, and a certain technical mannerism let suppose the years 70's as eventual manufacture's date.

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1979, ill. 122, p. 89. Wang Shixiang sustains, that the motif of *chi*-dragons, as it is executed on the screen of the Náprstek Museum's collection, with elongated bodies and freely curled tails developed during the middle Ming dynasty, see Wang Connoisseurship..., Vol. I, fig. 6.21, fig. 6.22, p. 169 and 171

<sup>29</sup> For the symbolic meaning of *lingzhi* fungus as well as of the following decorative patterns see Bartholomew Terese Tse: *Myths and Rebuses in Chinese Art*, San Francisco 1988; Bartholomew Terese Tse: *The Hundred Flowers: Botanical Motifs in Chinese Art*, San Francisco 1985; Lessing Ferdinand: *Über die Symbolsprache in der chinesischen Kunst*, in: *Sinica* 9, 1934 pp. 121–155, 217–231, 237–269; also *Sinica* 10, 1935 pp. 31–42; Eberhard Wolfram: *Lexikon chinesischer Symbole*, Köln 1983; Williams C. A. S.: *Chinese Symbolism and Art Motifs*, Vermont & Tokyo 1993

A damaged part under the rocks on the left corner reveals the greyish bottom preparation, which covers the wooden body. A thin coat of red lacquer is applied on as ground for the sketching of the decor. The red decoration seems executed in embossed and carved technique. It stands out against the shallow ground giving the picture a sense of deepness and reality. Behind the distant hills the sky, characterised by its typical diaper pattern, begins at the horizon with a straw-yellow colour, which mixes gradually up with light blue. The sky has been coloured after the carving and probably repainted in a later time (perhaps for restoration). Traces of restorations are on the bottom left corner and on the right upper part behind rocks. The screen is enclosed by a red-brownish lacquered frame, which is embellished with a key-fret pattern.

The theme of decoration is the "Fairy Land of Immortals", a common subject for birthday and good auspicious presents.<sup>30</sup> A sea landscape reminds of the Immortal Islands traditionally represented as rocky quiet places of luxuriant vegetation. On the bridge connecting the two shores the *yin-yang* emblem is well visible and together with other details (cranes, *qilin*) or "unicorn", deer, peaches of immortality, *lingzhi* fungus and so on) supplies the picture with its proper identity.<sup>31</sup> On the bridge a monk and three young attendants are transporting things. The monk seems still giving orders to his attendants. A fourth servant is carrying a big bottle. On the shores a swastika pattern is used to indicate the land. On the left side a hermit carries a bowl, behind him a couple of deer is half hidden by rocks. In a pavilion two Taoist sages are chatting, in front of them a crane is standing on a rock, *lingzhi* fungus grow around him.

An unicorn (*qilin*) stands on a rock on the right side. Turning his head to the left he lead to two meditating figures; an attendant is bringing them a big vase. A big pine tree and a peach tree introduce to one of the most important celebration of immortals, namely the harvest of the peach of immortality. On the shore a boy is carrying a carriage on which there is only one big peach, an immortal is waiting for him. A further immortal is bringing a big peach out of a grotto, a pheasant stands on steps. The busy preparation for the celebration of the peach harvest is carried on in the rooms of the building, which is half hidden by rocks and trees; there two immortals are playing music, the one flute and the other mouth-organ. A boat with two people on board is arriving, the front figure is carrying a *lingzhi* fungus. Roofs of pavilions and further buildings are submerged behind rocks and among clouds. On the left upper corner sparkle clouds and the sun complete the picture.

The back of the screen is decorated with the "Birds and Flowers" motif, executed in gold paint on black lacquer (ill. 3). The screen was thought to be seen from both sides and probably as birthday or good auspicious present.

The following seven screens constitute an interesting group for studying theme and genre evolution which took place in less than hundred years. Further they exemplify the gradual turn of a product, which was originally manufactured for the domestic market, into an export ware of large demand. The unifying feature is the technique in which the screens are executed the so called *kuancai*<sup>32</sup> or "polychrome carved", better known in Western countries as Bantam or Coromandel lacquer. It developed principally in the

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<sup>30</sup> Illustrated on Clifford Derek: Chinese Carved Lacquer, London 1992, p. 125

<sup>31</sup> Since the middle Ming dynasty pictures of single immortals as well as their group were presented as good auspicious gifts, see Fong Mary: The Iconography of the Popular Gods of Happiness, Emolument, and Longevity (Fu Lu Shou), in *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. XLIV, 1983, pp. 159-199

<sup>32</sup> Cranes, deer, *qilin*, and phoenixes accompany immortals and are present in their paradise as well as plants like the *lingchi* fungus do

Provinces Henan and Anhui<sup>33</sup> about the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, reached its zenith of popularity during Kang Xi's reign (1662–1722), and declined afterwards. This technique consists in carving out the design into a lacquered surface (usually of black or dark brown colour) until the cut reaches the bottom preparation made of three millimetres thick mixture of chalk, clay, bricks ash, limestone, and grass<sup>34</sup> which covers the wood panel. The holed out areas are then filled-in with coloured lacquer or oil-, or watercolours. The final effect is very decorative, therefore when this technique is applied on large surfaces as those of the screens gives undoubtedly an impression of splendour and magnificence. For about hundred years the *kuancai* screen has been considered in China the proper gift to present honoured personalities or their wives on occasion of special events like birthdays on high age (sixty, seventy and eighty were the most commemorated birthdays), official promotion or retirement from official career. These events are sometimes recorded on an inscription, which can be engraved and gilded or plainly painted on the screen. Since the *kuancai* screens have found their way to Europe<sup>35</sup> they became one of the export article most in demand. Up to the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century it has been almost only manufactured for export.<sup>36</sup>

The themes of decoration refer to the wish of a honoured long-life, therefore genre themes like "Life of Palace Ladies in their Private Quarters" and "Scenes from Immortals Life" are preferred for their clear message. The "Life of Palace Ladies" a traditional motif which has been represented in several variations since the time of Gu Gaizhi (348–409),<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Wang Shixiang recognised in the term *kuancai* the lacquer work that in Western countries has been denominated Bantam or Coromandel lacquer after the ports from which the ware was shipped to Europe. See Wang Shixiang: *Classic Chinese Furniture*, Hong Kong 1988, p. 31. Moreover see Wang Shixiang: *Commentaries on Xiushilu*, Cultural Relics Press of China, 1983. Mayer Martina gives a clear bibliographical review of the terms used in Chinese for this technique in: *Koromandellacke (kuancaiqi) Überblick über den bisherigen Stand der Forschung und Untersuchungen zu ausgewählten figürlichen Motiven*, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg 1990–91, unpublished master exam, p. 1. Other Chinese terms used to refer to this technique are: *kehui* "carved ash", *dadiaotian* "bold carving and filling", see: *2000 Years of Chinese Lacquer*, Hong Kong 1993 p. 208

<sup>34</sup> The province Anhui with its lively cultural and economical centre Huizhou is recently reconsidered by Zhou Gongxin: *Qing Kangxi qianqi kuancai 'Han-gong chunxiao'qi pingfeng yu zhongguo qigongyi zhi xichuan. t)* ("Lacquer Screens from the Kangxi time in *kuancai* with theme 'Spring Morning in Han Palaces' and the Westward Spread of Chinese Lacquer Art"), Taipei 1995, pp. 23–24

<sup>35</sup> Compare the analysis of the materials used for the layer of bottom preparation given in the following sources: Speiser Werner: *Lackkunst in Ostasien*, Baden-Baden 1965, p. 211; Strange Eduard: *Chinese Lacquer*, London 1926, p. 9; Feddersen Martin: *Chinesische Lackarbeiten*, Braunschweig 1958, p. 42; Herberts Kurt: *Das Buch der Ostasiatischen Kunst*, Düsseldorf 1959, p. 334; Beurdeley Michel: *Chinesische Möbel*, Tübingen 1979, p. 135; Stäßer Edith: *Ex Oriente Lux Lackkunst aus Ostasien und Europa*, Köln 1979, p. 12. In: Hong Kong 1993, op. cit. p. 208; Craig Clunas: *Chinese Export Art and Design*, London 1987, p. 82, and in Kopplin Monika: *Ostasiatische Lackarbeiten*, Münster 1996?, p. 37. See also Böttger Walter: "Ein Setzschirm in Koromandellacktechnik mit Gestalten aus dem Shui-hu-chuan" in: *Jahrbuch des Museums für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig*, vol. XXVI, Berlin 1969, pp. 189–204.

<sup>36</sup> The first mention of walls presumably panelled with *kuancai* folds is made 1682 in: "The Diary of John Evelyn", Oxford 1955, Vol. IV, p. 288. Works of Bantam or of Coromandel lacquer or 'verniss de Coromandel' are recorded first 1750 in: "Livre Journal" of Lazare Duval, a French collector. As far as known, the earliest known *kuancai* screen is dated 1682, it is a screen with hunting scene presented to Joshua Edisbury of Erthing; see Jourdain M. and Jenins S.: *Chinese Export Art in the Eighteenth Century*, London 1950, pp. 21–22

<sup>37</sup> About the modern and contemporary application of *kuancai* technique see Mayer op. cit., p. 19, for references p.20, and also Hornby·Joan: *Koromandellack*, in: *Europa und die Kaiser von China 1240–1916*, Frankfurt 1985, p. 102–104, p. 104. 20<sup>th</sup> century *kuancai* screens are illustrated on Poirier Marcel: *Coromandel*, in: "Arts of Asia", 1972, Vol. 2, N.1, pp. 39–43

became during the Ming dynasty the expression of cultural refinement, of a life of leisure spent far away from the troubles of the official career in the relaxing privacy of his own home. The depiction of this theme on *kuancai* screens follows a well established compositional scheme<sup>38</sup> which shows always the honouree sitting or standing in a central building – surrounded by attendants and family's components – who while still waiting for his/her guests enjoys a musical performance and a dance. Further elements like terraces, pavilions, children playing, guests at the main gate and so on can be omitted or substituted at pleasure but the representation of the honouree in the main building constitutes the core of this genre.

The twelve fold screens of illustrations 4 and 5 (inventory n. A 19173); and same measures, height 119.5 cm, width pro fold 21.5 cm) show a rich composition as well as stylistic features of earlier models of the Kang Xi's period. They could be dated back to the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Both screens are manufactured as set for a married couple, they are stylistically and technically identical. The decorative design is finely cut on a red brownish lacquer coat, the large gamma of lacquer colours in the tones green, blue, red, pink, white and black reproduces two lively scenes representing the commemoration of a festival honouring a gentleman (ill. n. 4) and a lady (ill. n. 5). The composition slightly differs presenting a variation of secondary themes – the pavilions and the stairs on the left side of the screen of ill. 5 are substitute by one pavilion and a terrace on the screen ill.4. The remaining parts of the composition are almost the same. On the right side of both screens the arriving guests are received at the gate. On the screen dedicated to the gentleman, guests are mainly men and are coming riding by horse. Groups of guests are shown standing on the stairs, while others bring gifts. The presence of children confers the scene a joyful character. A recurrent compositional element is the flowers pot settled in front of the main building and the small construction (a pavilion or a single-room building) situated on its right side. Among the various details good auspicious animals are never missed.

The high decorative character of this kind of screen is accentuated by the richly depicted frames. On them a panorama of auspicious animals, "Flowers of the Four Seasons", "Hundred Objects of the Antiquity", and landscapes are alternatively executed in *kuancai* technique, too. The use of decorative motifs cycles, which spread on *kuancai* screens as well as on other handicrafts since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, rooted into the erudition and the cultural revival of the upper classes. Moreover through these stereotyped symbols the wish of ever lasting luck and prosperity is immediately expressed.

The reverse of the screens is plain lacquered with a red brownish lacquer coat.

The general condition of both screens is good, although colours are partially missed uncovering the bottom preparation. The red brownish lacquer coat has faded.

Both following four folds screens (ill. 6 and 7, inventory n. 34231; height 198 cm, width per fold 41.5 cm; ill. 8 and 9, inventory n. 34230; height 147 cm, width per fold 40.2) are of a later date, they have been probably manufactured during the Yong Zheng's period (1723–1735). They present stylistic, compositional and decorative similarities which let suppose that they were manufactured as a set for a married couple. The representation became more and more symbolic reducing considerably the narrative of details. Themes and composition are simplified to one scene picture, resembling yet closer the woodcut printing. Even the range of colours (probably oil colours) shows less variety of tones. The carv-

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<sup>38</sup> Zhou, op. cit. p. 35., considers the handscroll "Admonition of Instructress to Palace Ladies" the first artistic representation of this theme, excluding the Han (206 BC-220 AD) pictorial murals



ing is less fine as it was on the former considered screens, nevertheless it is still well executed.

According to the traditional compositional scheme the main building is settled in the middle of the scene. On illustration 6 a standing lady is receiving her guests surrounded by her attendants and musicians. The presence of mythological animals and Immortals increases, the building itself is depicted on a high terrace among clouds as it would be already in the Immortals world. The honouree receives right away the visit of the "God of Longevity", *Shoulao* and of the Queen Mother of the West, *Xiwangmu*, who could bestow longevity as well. Both approach the main building riding their attributed animal, respectively the crane and the phoenix. They bring the honouree the best present at all: longevity. Further wishes of long life express two immortals on the right side, the bowed figure opens lightly the box he is carrying, and a bat flies out of it, reaching other three flying ones. The second figure carries a lotus flower, symbol of pureness. The middle figure of the three men group, which stands in front of the stair, carries a big peach, the fruit of immortality, which grows on the Western Paradise of *Xiwangmu*.

The second screen (ill. 8, inventory n. 34230) of the set exemplifies more clearly the evolution of cultural syncretism of the period. The compositional *kuancai* screens formula – main building in central position and secondary construction set on the right side – is combined with further elements like the boat transporting the Immortals, the Immortals approaching on clouds, and fabulous animals, which are usual on representations of Fairy Land. Moreover figures, who belong to the religious tradition are set on genre environment. Thus the "Three Sages"<sup>39</sup> – Buddha, Confucius, and Laozi – substitute the honouree in the main building. They are portrayed considering together the mystery contained on a scroll (often the *ying yang* emblem is depicted on) according to an iconography which developed during the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>40</sup> The founders of the tree main philosophical thoughts have been undergone a popularisation process, which supported the assimilation of their features to the "Three Stars" *San Xing* – *Fuxing* or "Star of Happiness", *Luxing* or "Star of Emolument", and *Shouxing* aa) or "Star of Longevity".<sup>41</sup> The "Three Sages" or "Three Stars" iconography expresses than the *Fu Lu Shou* – Happiness Emolument Longevity – auspicious formula, which can be considered the basic message of a *kuancai* screen.

In the pavilion on the left side the Lohan Botelo (Arhat Bhadra)<sup>42</sup> depicted with the tiger his attributed animal, sits in meditation. In front of the main building the immortals *Li Nozha* on flamed wheels, his father *Lijing* the "Pagoda Bearer", and *Liu Haixian* with the three legged toad enrich the population of Fairy Land. The Eight Immortals, the most popular under the Immortals, are approaching the shore on a boat. Their popularity dwells into the secret message connected with their biographies: each of them symbolises a different social and cultural class and all together represent the humanity in its variety, even in the differentiation of age and sex.

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<sup>39</sup> Mayer pointed out eight main and secondary recurring motifs on *kuancai* screens, see op. cit., Tafel zu Liste 1.1./ 1.2.A

<sup>40</sup> The iconography of the "Three Sages" *San Sheng* developed during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries as artistic expression of a recognised assimilation of the Three Doctrines Confucianism-Buddhism-Taoism. For more details see Fong op. cit., the whole article is explicative about the evolution of this iconography

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. pp. 190–191, fig. 12

<sup>42</sup> Buddha was assimilated to the "Star of Happiness", Confucius portrayed in official robe was assimilated to the "Star of Emolument", and Laozi depicted with lobed front to the "Star of Longevity". See ibid. p. 194

*Xiwangmu* and her bridegroom *Dongwanggong* “King Father of the East” can not miss the appointment and are just arriving with their escort to bring their blessing. The decoration of the frames on both screens is very similar in style, the screen of illustration 6 presents the theme “Flowers of the four Seasons” on the lower frame, and “Hundred Objects of the Antiquity” on the upper frame. The lower frame of the screen of illustration 8 is depicted with a combination of flowers and objects conceived as rebus,<sup>43</sup> while the upper frame is embellished by four landscape pictures. The theme “Birds and Flowers” embellished the reverse of both screens (ill. 7 and 9). Identical flower scrolls are depicted on the decorative borders. An interesting difference among these two screens is the lack of the upper frame on the screen of illustration 9. The composition of the reverse in one-scene panel lets suppose the intention of reuse the folds to panel a wall or to mount them as cabinets. Except for some limited parts, on which the colours are faded or even lost showing the white bottom preparation, the general condition of both screens is very good.

The spread of woodcut prints as well as New Year Prints influenced closely the style and the decorative motifs of other handicrafts, proposing a common language.<sup>44</sup> Even the wishes were expressed according to an usual formula, the most diffuse was the representation of the Fairy Land or Immortals Land. The depiction of the Immortals started about the mid Ming dynasty as their biographies were already detailed. Born as characters of Yuan dramas<sup>45</sup> their popularity grew in Ming literary works. Their representation on art media increased especially in times of political and social crisis, as the trust to the present and to the society faded away, and the popular belief of salvation thanks the help of Gods and of faith became stronger.

As far as known, the earliest representation of “Fairy Land” on *kuancai* screen dated back to the 1671.<sup>46</sup> During the 18<sup>th</sup> century this theme has increased on popularity acquiring more and more figures which conveyed from Buddhist and Chinese folk tradition.

The eight folds screen of illustration 10 (inventory n. 29701; height 220 cm, width per fold 47.3 cm) exemplifies the cultural syncretism which developed further on during the Qian Long period. On an island landscape the Lohans, the Immortals and popular patrons are depicted in groups.<sup>47</sup> Their settlement defines the narrative direction on the screen, which conveys to the middle of the representation highlighting the central scene, a congratulation scene. The honouree is *Xiwangmu* who is portrayed on the fourth fold together with the “Eight Immortals” and the “Three Stars” watching two dancers. The occasion

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<sup>43</sup> For the biographies of the single personages see Williams op. cit.; Mayers William Frederick: *Chinese Reader's Manual*, Shanghai 1924; Derek Walters: *Chinese Mythology – An Encyclopedia of Myth and Legend*, London 1992; Van Goidsenhoven Jacques: *Heros et Divinites de la Chine*, Bruxelles 1971; Kaltenmark Max: *Le Lie-sien Tchouan – Biographies légendaires des Immortels taoistes de l'antiquité*. And also Yang Richard F.S.: *A Study of the Origin of the Legend of the Eight Immortals*, in: *Oriens Extremus*, 5, 1958, pp. 1–22; Lai T.C.: *The Eight Immortals*, Hong Kong 1972; Diez Ernst: *Dauistische Unsterbliche*, in: *Sinica*, 14, 1–3/6, pp. 48–53, plates I–VIII; Fong Wen: *Lohans and a Bridge to Heaven*, Washington 1958

<sup>44</sup> For the explanation of the rebuses see: Bartolomew: *Myths and Rebuses...* op. cit.; Lessing Ferdinand op. cit.

<sup>45</sup> See the study of Ledderose Lothar: *Modul und Serie in der chinesischen Kunst*, in: “*Jahrbuch der Akademie der Wissenschaften*” 1990, also published as book: *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art*, Princeton University 2000

<sup>46</sup> See Lai op. cit., pp. 2–7

<sup>47</sup> The screen is illustrated in Cescinsky Herbert: *Chinese Furniture (Collection in France)*, London 1922, ill. pp. 14–15



Illustration 1. The five fold screen. Lacquered wood, carved an openwork decoration, scroll, colours on silk. China., end of 17<sup>th</sup> century – beginning. of 18<sup>th</sup> century. Height 315 cm. Purchased in 1983. NpM 29 050.



Illustration 2, 3. The one-panel screen in carved polychrome lacquer (ticaoqi), Fairy Land of Immortals, reverse side: birds and flowers motif in gold on black lacquer. China, 70's of 18<sup>th</sup> century. Height 160 cm, width 150 cm. Original owner unknown\*. NpM A 26 555.





Illustration 4, 5: The twelve fold screen. Coromandel lacquer (kuancai). Festival commemorating lady, festival commemorating a gentleman. China, the beginning of 18<sup>th</sup> century. Height 119.5 cm, width per fold 21.5 cm. Donated in 1988 by the National Theatre. NpM A 19 173.



Illustration 6, 7: The four fold screen. Coromandel lacquer (kuancai). The immortals congratulate, reverse side: birds and flowers. China., Yong-zhen period (1723–1735). Height 198 cm, width per fold 41.5 cm. Hloucha's collection, purchased in 1955. NpM 34 231.



Illustration 8, 9: The four fold screen. Coromandel lacquer (kuancai). "The three sages, the immortals congratulate, reverse side: birds and flowers." China, Yong-zheng period (1733–1735). Height 147cm width per fold 40.2 cm. Hloucha's collection, purchased in 1955. NpM 34 230.







Illustration 10, 11: The eight fold screen. Coromandel lacquer (kuancai). Fairy Land, reverse side: hundred birds and the morning phoenix. China. Qian-long period (1736–1795). Height 220, width per fold 47.3 cm. Donation of Mr. J. Hnízdo in 1981. NpM 29 701.

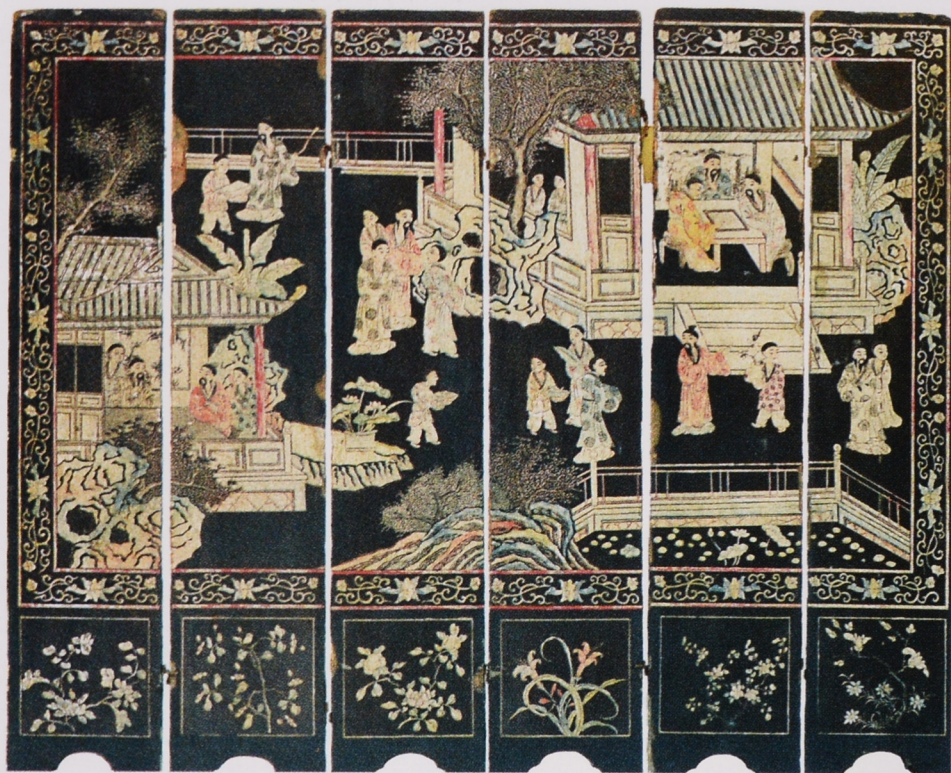


Illustration 12, 13: The six fold screen. Coromandel laquer (kuancai). Genre scenes, reverse side: birds and flowers." China, the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century. Height 141cm, width per fold 26.2 cm. Acquisition unknown\*. NpM A 26 750.

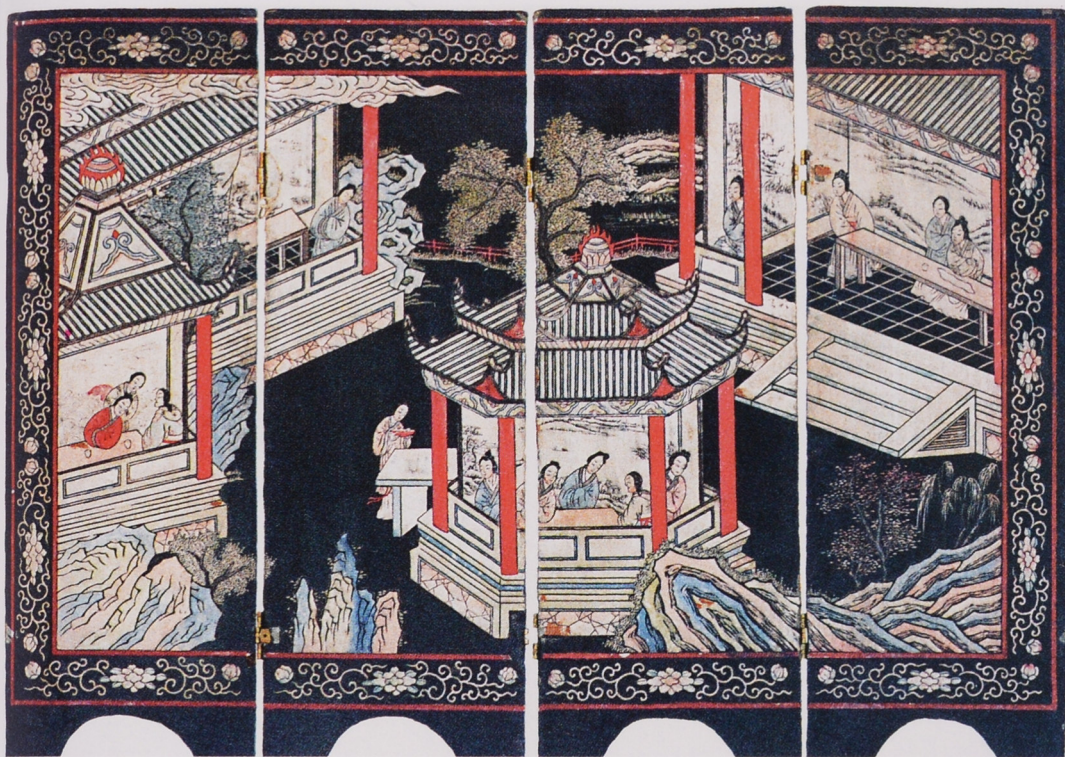


Illustration 14, 15: The four fold screen. Coromandel lacquer (kuancai). Activities of palace ladies, reverse side: ancient objects and flowers of the four seasons. China, the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century. Height 91 cm width per fold 28.1 cm. Acquisition unknown\*. NpM 20 419



Illustration 16, 17: The four fold screen. "Lacque cuir" (huaqi). Activities of palace ladies, reverse side: birds and flowers. China, middle of 18<sup>th</sup> century. Height 182 cm, width per fold 40.5 cm. Acquisition unknown\*. NpM 20 502.



Illustration 18, 19: The four fold screen. Combination of inlaid and lacquer painting (huaqi). Activities of palace ladies, reverse side: birds and flowers. China, middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Height 92 cm, width per fold 30 cm. Acquisition unknown\*. NpM 20 628.



Illustration 20, 21: The six fold screen. Multiple precious objects inlay (baibaoqian, chuiqi)). Meeting the immortals at Jasper Pool, reverse side: season flowers. China, middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Height 185 cm, width per fold 42.3 cm. Purchased in 1995 from Starožitnosti. NpM A 21 943.

Illustration 22 and 23 pls see the next page.



Illustration 24, 25: The eight fold screen. Lacquer painting (huaqi) and carved in openwork. Probably scenes from a romance, reverse side: genre scenes. China, first half of 19<sup>th</sup> century. Height 178,5 cm width per fold 45.5 cm. Acquisition unknown\*. NpM 20 730.







Illustration 22, 23: The twelve fold screen. Combination of "multiple precious object inlay" and embossed lacquer (baobaoqi, chui qi). Episodes from the life of the immortals, reverse side: gold painted inscriptions. China, first half of the 19th century. Height 241 cm, width per fold 35.5 cm. Purchased from dr. Lafar in 1963. NpM A 1671.



Illustration 26, 27: The six folds screen. Carved on wood "yellow flower's pear" (huanghuali) and oil colours. Scenes from Chinese life, reverse side: birds and flowers, China, first half of 19<sup>th</sup> century. Height with lunettes 196 cm, width per fold 44.5 cm. Acquisition unknown.\*

\* (In the 1950 the Náprstek Museum received a number of objects from many local museums without any documentation, the original owner cannot be thus traced back.) NpM 20 123.

of the great meeting is her birthday, which falls each six thousand years, when the "Peaches of Immortality" are ripe, thus coinciding with the celebration of the "Peach Festival". The central settlement of the congratulation scene, as well as the parade of guests follow a compositional formula, which has been established and applied for the depiction of the "Congratulation's Scenes" on *kuancai* screens since the beginning of their production. Nevertheless conventional details, like the Immortals riding on clouds on both upper corners, and the boat with three female the Immortals coming from the right, are common with the representations of the "Fairy Land".

The brightening effect of the colours red, blue, yellow and green, used to underline the figures, and the iconography of the characters give the picture a folkloristic flavour. The frame's decoration is enclosed in rigid compartments reminding of arrangements on woodcuts and on porcelain. The decorative scrolls on the borders are later imitations of the key-fret and of the more precious motif of two dragons fronting the ideogram *shou* or "longevity", which were common on *kuancai* screens of the Kang Xi time.

"Hundred Birds and the Morning Phoenix" depicted on the reverse (ill. 11), is a loved variation of the theme "Birds and Flowers", it can embellish the reverse of a *kuancai* screen as well as to be its main decorative motif. The conventional presence of the phoenix (very often represented in couple), queen of the birds and announcer of piece, supports the feeling of a properly ruled world and of harmony. According to an established compositional scheme, the phoenix couple is set centrally, birds combined with their corresponding flowers are sometime organized after the seasons. The falcon, representing courage, is missing.

On the evidence of these five *kuancai* screens, an interesting evolution on the expression of the wish of long and honourable life can be pointed out: on earlier pieces the depiction of "Palace Scenes" with their representation of official environment was considered more appropriate, later on the presence of auspicious animals and Immortals increased gradually until Immortals Pantheon on the Western Paradise became the ideal theme to express the best wishes. It seems that the acquirement of the precious conditions *Fu Lu Shou* – Happiness Longevity and Emolument – have grown out of the human range, therefore the help of luck which only superior beings can bestow, became essential.

From the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century screens executed in *kuancai* technique became smaller in size and less accurate in quality. Costs and time of manufacture were reduced applying easier techniques and depicting more conventional themes as "Genre Scenes" in simple composition. These kinds of economical screens have reached Europe until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, challenging the classical revival which desired to put an end to the Chinoiserie fashion.<sup>48</sup>

The last two examples (ill. 12 and 13, inventory n. A 26 750, height 141 cm, width per fold 26.2 cm; ill. 14 and 15, inventory n. 20419, height 91 cm, width per fold 28.1 cm) of the group of screens executed in *kuancai* technique are very explicative of the genre in vogue in Europe around the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The cut is rough, the figures lack of elegance and are depicted with pale oil colours in a mannered way. The employment of decorative cliché, wich was common on handicrafts of the period, shows the decadence of the art expression on manufacture works. The composition, strongly influenced by woodcut illustrations, appears like an assemblage of single scenes, conceived intentionally as independent parts, in order to be cut out from the contest easily and be reused in other way.

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<sup>48</sup> The identification of single figures does not concern directly the present study, which concentrates on aspects of stylistic evolution

A further interesting feature is the reduction of the decorative frame (ill. 12) until it disappears completely (ill. 13 reverse; ill. 14) or the use of the motifs of the frame to fill the reverse (ill. 15).<sup>49</sup> The screen is gradually sectioned in decorative parts and is not considered as unity anymore. The two screens are a vivid example of the influence of the market on art production.

The lotus flower scrolls on the border of both screens is very similar, the distribution of the colours is boring, the red colour is dominant and the green and blue tones are pale. Almost all ladies figures of illustration 14 are depicted in a mannered way with their head bowed. The colouring of the stones is mannered, too (it has been already applied for the landscape painting of the upper frame of the screen of illustration 8 and reminds of wood-cut colouring). The quality of the colours is very poor, and under them the white bottom preparation can be seen.

The following four folds screen (ill. 16 and 17; inventory n. 20502, height 182 cm, width per fold 40.5 cm) constitutes evidence of the influence of the *kuancai* technique on screens manufacturing. The decorative motifs – “Activities of Palace Ladies” on the front and “Birds and Flowers” on the reverse – are traced on a red lacquer coat by the mean of carved lines, the decoration is then painted with lacquer colours. This procedure, also called *laque cuir*, reduced the time of manufacturing keeping an high decorative effect. The composition of the front echoes that of earlier *kuancai* screens: the main building is slightly settled to the left, the terrace substituted the richness of buildings, the pavilion on the right side is then separated from the main building. Nevertheless two accessory details, the boat with the two women and the small pavilion, are reminder of the compositional richness of the most beautiful *kuancai* screens.<sup>50</sup>

A technique consisting in the combination of inlaid and “lacquer painting” *huaqi* developed during the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The general decorative effect was that of the mother-of-pearl lacquer works, but costs and time of manufacture were again considerably reduced. An example of its application is given by the next two screens (ill. 18 and 19, inventory n. 20628, height 92 cm, width per fold 30 cm; ill. 20 and 21, inventory n. 21943; height 185 cm, width per fold 42.3 cm). The figures as well as some parts of the buildings are carved out from the bottom preparation as in the technical procedure of “multiple precious objects inlay” *baibaoqian*, then a putty made of wood or of soapstone is stuck on. These parts of the design are in relief recalling the effect of the “embossed lacquer” (*duiqi*) technique. The remaining representation is finished with lacquer colours. On the four folds screen of illustration 18, ivory, nephrite and soapstone are inlaid for the decoration of flowers. The use of gold lacquer on a black lacquer surface, the stylisation of details and the sober border’s decoration show the influence of Japanese aesthetic on Chinese export art. The conventional theme “Activities of Palace Ladies” finds here expression in a garden surrounding with very reduced presence of buildings (they are partially depicted on the two external folds). The fence and the water connect the four framed folds, which otherwise could be viewed singularly. On the reverse (ill. 19) the theme “Birds and Flowers” is executed in lacquer painting.

The representation on the six folds screen of illustration 20 brings us again among “The Immortals”, who are meeting at the Jasper Pool on the Western Paradise, the traditional

<sup>49</sup> For detailed information about the spread and the decline of the Chinoiserie vogue see Hugh op. cit.

<sup>50</sup> Compare it with the double-chest, which is made with wood panels decorated with the motifs typically used on *kuancai* screens’ frames; illustrated in Cescinsky op. cit., plate XVI

place for the celebration of the Peach Festival. The picture is crowded with figures and details reminding the depiction of traditional Chinese festivals. The balustrade sets a compositional accent dividing the far-coming guests from those already present. The hostess *Xiwangmu* is settled on the fourth fold from right and watches the scene on the pool: Immortals riding their attributes are paying homage to her. The damaged parts (for example the bridge on the left and the balustrade on the central panels, but also some figures) help to reconstruct the steps of the technical procedure. The design is first sketched with red and green colours on a black lacquer coat, then figures and trees are cut out into a thick bottom preparation. On the engraved parts soft stones and other materials are stuck on, raising from the lacquer surface. The remaining design is depicted with a good variety of lacquer colours (red, green, white, blue, light blue, rose pink, brown, yellow and gold painting are used very descriptively).

The side border is embellished with mother-of-pearl inlay in the motif of four petals flowers. The feet and the reverse (ill. 21) are decorated with "Seasons Flowers" executed with gold lacquer on black lacquer surface. This kind of decoration, already used during the 17<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>51</sup> seems to have been executed by means of woodcut plates.

The general condition is not very good: beside the missing engraved stones on the front, the large damaged parts on the reverse (third and fourth folds from the right), and further small parts, the lacquer surface has lost the polishing and results dull. The screen could be dated from the middle of 18<sup>th</sup> century.

With the last three folding screens (ill. 22 and 23; inventory n. A 1671, ill. 24 and 25; inventory n. 20 730, ill. 26 and 27, inventory n. 20 123) we are going to consider later pieces manufactured in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. About this time screens increased again in size. Each fold is divided in three or two compartments on which the decorative motifs are illustrated. A frame encloses the compartments enhancing their visual singularity. The screen has lost its global pictorial effect becoming an assemblage of scenes to be viewed as set. The lively use of colours and the descriptive use of many details emphasise the high decorative character of these screens. Although the influence of the foreign trade on screens manufacture is still by the time very strong, the aesthetic impression preserves a domestic flavour.

A definitely popular flavour owns the 12 folds screen of illustration 22 (inventory n. A 1671; height 241 cm, width 35.5 cm). On a black lacquer surface the illustration of episodes of the life of Immortals is executed with the combination of both techniques: "multiple precious object inlay" and "embossed lacquer". The meander pattern executed in openwork embellishes the bottom border, it is repeated as relief work on the middle panel on the front and as painted motif on the reverse. The short inscriptions and very few details on the front as well as the inscriptions and the decor on the reverse (ill. 23) are painted. Each fold is divided in three parts: the bottom compartments are embellished with flowers of the twelve months, the middle ones with a lotus flower, and the upper ones with Immortals represented singularly or in group. The first line of characters, which are written in "official script" *lishu*, introduce them. The reverse presents an analogue partition and decoration, except for the addition of birds to the flowers motif. The inscriptions on the re-

<sup>51</sup> Compare the *kuancai* screen in the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, dated 1673, illustrated on Zhou op. cit. pp. 6–7. It constitutes in the richness of its decoration and in the fullness of its composition one of the most beautiful example of *kuancai* screens

<sup>52</sup> Compare the underside of a low table type *kang* ii) of a private collection dated early 1680s Clifford op. cit. plate 90b, p. 117

verse are painted in gold lacquer and written in "regular script" *kaishu*, they are completed by the author's seal in red ink. On the last fold his complete signature Huang Xizhang is well readable.<sup>52</sup>

There are visible traces of a later polishing, which could have been responsible of the dulling of the black lacquer surface and of the lacquer colours of birds and flowers decoration on the bottom panels of the reverse.

The eight folds screen of illustration 24 and 25 (two folds are missing; inventory n. 20730; height 178.5 cm, width per fold 45.5 cm) as well as the six folds screen of illustration 26 and 27 (inventory n. 20123; height with lunettes 196 cm, width per fold 44.5 cm) exemplify the stage of autonomy that the decoration of the screen's reverse has reached during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The thematic differentiation between front and reverse surfaces has been a traditional feature for screens which are thought to be seen from both sides. It seems that at least until the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century it was preferred to apply the same technique procedure on both surfaces, creating an art object with stylistic homogeneity. Afterwards, as exemplified by the screen in red carved (ill. 3 and 4), the use of two completely different decorative techniques is aimed to support the autonomous view of both surfaces and to create two distinguished effects. Quite often a lighter executable technique was chosen for the reverse to shorten and to simplify the manufacture, nevertheless it was paid attention to the final effect of homogeneity. This aesthetic principle has been not observed on the manufacturing of both screens illustrated on plates 24 and 25, 26 and 27. The surfaces of the front and of the reverse are different in technique and style, only the partition of the decoration in panels and partially the frame and borders constitute unifying elements.

The screen of illustration 24 and 25 presents on the front a meticulous decoration made of wood, which is carved in openwork finished only on one side. On the reverse genre scenes are executed in "lacquer painting". On both sides the decor is organised in three framed compartments, the lowest ones are moderately bigger than the middle ones. The general effect is of a pictures exhibition which would have fit the panelled walls of the European Chinoiserie rooms.

The carved work of the front is lacquered red as the rim of the frame, the ground has been originally covered by gold lacquer whose traces are still on the first and on the fifth folds. The upper decorative panels are embellished with the motif of "Hundred Ancient Objects". The middle and lower panels illustrate probably scenes from a romance. The richly detailed views show figures, buildings, animals, plants and flowers with plastic effect.

The painted decoration of the reverse shows strong Japanese influences in the rendering of the landscape (on the upper panels as well as on the background of the figural scenes) and in the general aesthetic effect. On a black lacquer surface figures and landscape are rendered with soft tones of red, pink-rose, light blue, green, white and brown. The central settlement of the figures in garden surrounding is in accordance with the Chinoiserie taste of the time. Gold lacquer for the rims of the frames and red-brownish lacquer with gold dust on the borders highlight the decorative effect of the screen. The screen's support is embellished with lobbed aprons; the rims are painted red on the front and gilded on the reverse.

A further example of Chinoiserie motifs represents the last screen (ill. 26 and 27) considered on this study. The carved work on *huanghuali* wood (yellow flower's pear) is varnished with a plain lacquer coat (ill. 26). The decorative effect is supported by the contrast of tones of the carved wood, which is darker on relief parts. The folds are divided in two

compartments, the lowest ones are embellished with the "Hundred Ancient Objects" motif, the upper ones illustrate scenes of Chinese life, a conventional Chinoiserie theme quite in demand for the export. The carving work is well done giving a lively pictorial effect. The figures as well as the trees and the plants are plastically rendered, many details crowd the pictures. Each fold is further embellished with a frame, a lunette and with an openwork carving border settled on the bottom. The ideogram *fu* "happiness" is carved four times on the long sides of the frame, flowers and meander rolls fulfil the remaining room. On the lunettes the "Birds and Flowers" motif is framed by vine's leaves, which is a further sign of an assumption of Western decorative motifs.

Even the motif of "Birds and Flowers", which is depicted with oil colours on the red-brownish varnished *huanghuali* wood surface on the reverse of the screen (ill. 27), has undergone the taste of the foreign trade. The colouring expresses naturalistic effects which were not requested by the domestic market with such an intensity. The whole decoration is characterised by the rendering of volumes, trying to win back the third dimension, the depth which European missed in Chinese handicrafts.<sup>53</sup> The wine's leaves on the lunettes and the openwork carving on the bottom are gilded.

The export art of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> century is the vivid expression of the Chinese attempt to come closer to the European taste. It moreover describes the gradual process of adaptation and assumption, from Chinese side, of aesthetic principles, which did not belong to its tradition. Trying to satisfy the market demand, Chinese artisans mirrored more or less consciously aspects of their domestic culture through the European spectacles. On the other side European *educated Europeans*, who about the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries were looking for the ideal country and thought to have found it in China, celebrated enthusiastically every aspect of Chinese culture, grasping only what could match their own task: the acclamation of the absolutist monarchies and of their social order. Although the reception of works of art like screens – considered almost essentially for their decorative and descriptive features – shows that, what Europe was looking for, was just to get back its own cultural shadow, nevertheless thanks to their expressiveness, screens could enclose for a while the meetings of the European high society in exotic and fantastic atmosphere, demonstrating their evoking strength once again.

The contribution of the visual arts to the cultural exchange between Europe and China was not limited to stimulate the consciousness about the reciprocal artistic traditions, but it provided both parts also with a base for a cultural encounter.

The export production can be considered a piece of evidence in the attempt to figure out the European reception of the Chinese world.

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<sup>53</sup> For the translation of the inscriptions see Appendix

<sup>54</sup> See Wappenschmidt Friederike: "Auf gut chinesisches in der Luft stehen. Gestaltungsprinzipien der Chinamode", in *Weltkunst*, 62, 1992, N.2.15.1, pp. 83–86

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