A clean table by a bright window,
A tea stove by a bamboo couch,
A priceless zither over the bed,
An antique painting on the wall,
An undying fragrance,
An incense burner never short of sandalwood,
A cool soothing breeze:
A flower vase never out of fresh water,
Ten thousand books for leisurely reading,
A chess board for many a pleasant game.

Feng Menglong, Ming dynasty [49]

A courtesan’s range of interests and knowledge was therefore not altogether so different from that of the genteel ladies of the upper classes, the difference being that the courtesan discussed and partook of these interests with her male literati clientele instead of her peers. This, in truth, is the essence of the unique position a successful courtesan would find herself in. In spite of society’s strict protocols for the public lives of ladies, keeping them very separate from the male-dominated mainstream, the courtesan was able to span both the male and female worlds, within certain constraints. This unusual status often led to courtesans developing very close and fruitful, if unconventional, relationships with some of the most important and talented members of the ruling classes. This unique position of trust, coupled with an enviable network of influential connections, often made courtesans very effective intermediaries. In China, a society historically averse to direct social contact, often immobilized by convention and increasingly concerned with saving face, these elegant liaisons could be a most valuable asset. Courtesans were often able to aid in important introductions and were, in all likelihood, very effective and discreet agents in the private market of purchasing art and antiques amongst important collectors.

Although being a courtesan was a profession and often remained just that, there are a number of examples of courtesans leaving their professional lives behind by marrying one of their clients and achieving the dream of ‘respectability’. This was undoubtedly the desired outcome for many young courtesans. These unions were often a real coming-together of hearts and minds, usually more so than traditional marriages.
Rare set of portable weiqi boxes

HUANGHUALI
17TH – EARLY 18TH CENTURY
DIA: 16.4CM × H: 24CM

This is an ingenious variant of the weiqi box, sophisticatedly crafted from rich, warm huanghuali timber. The two circular boxes stack on top of each other and are held steadfastly in place by a lid and a carrying bracket. In this way, small weiqi pieces, together with a folding board, can be easily transported, allowing a casual game between scholars to take place anywhere.
Naturalistic ruyi sceptre

Boxwood

18th Century

L: 29.5 CM

Far more naturalistic in style than the previous example, this ruyi sceptre is charged with the energy and motion of nature. Crisply carved with multiple lingzhi heads and several twig-like shafts, this sceptre derives its inspiration heavily from Taoism.

Huanghuali

17th Century

W: 7.5 CM × D: 40.5 CM × H: 0.5 CM

The hu was originally devised as a writing tablet to be used in the presence of figures of supreme authority, such as emperors. After the period of antiquity, these enigmatic objects were more often used as symbols of status, alluding to the holder’s position as one of sufficient importance to be summoned by the emperor. Hugh Moss points out that as these objects did not seem to form any part of Qing court life, extant examples must pre-date the Qing dynasty. Most surviving examples of the hu are made of ivory, and it is extremely rare to find examples crafted in other materials. This fine example, made of extraordinarily grained and patinated huanghuali wood, must have been crafted for a very discerning patron.
This extremely rare pair of boxes was custom-made to store the lianghan ceyao, which can be translated as ‘Policies of the Two Han’ (dynasties), a Song dynasty text comprised of twelve volumes that became quite popular during the Qing dynasty. Each box is carved on the front with the title lianghan ceyao and additionally with the words xiahan and shanghan, denoting the first and second box for each group of volumes. These are carved in li script, popular in the Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE). These book boxes were almost certainly made for imperial use; their simple and dignified design and the sombre tonalities of the zitan timber befit a sense of august cultivation, perfectly in keeping with their use. The boxes are precisely made and all of the interior surfaces are covered with a layer of thin burnished lacquer, once again manifesting their superior quality and thus the importance of what they held within them.
Trays

Trays had a central role in the day-to-day activities of the Chinese scholar. Their most obvious use was both practical and symbolic; practical in the sense that they were often used to carry cups of wine or tea, symbolic since the act of presenting such a beverage on a small tray was an act of communion between like-minded literati. The presentation was almost as important as the beverage itself and the trays created an exclusive and intimate arena for this ceremony. Trays were also often used to present special foods and fruits to gods, spirits and ancestors in small household shrines.

A fundamental element on the scholar’s table, wooden trays were used to delineate a space on which items of a particular ritual (ink preparation, seal preparation, or other) might be grouped together. Similarly, trays were habitually used in the practice of incense burning; the various necessary components were often kept on a tray for easy carrying to an incense stand, or again, to define a distinct area of activity.

Because of their many and various uses, trays were made in a great array of shapes and sizes that would either complement or contrast with the objects placed upon them. Their styles range from the supremely sophisticated, to the more humble or naturalistic designs. Their shapes are similarly varied; both simple and complex geometric shapes can be observed, as well as certain ‘organic’ forms. This great variety in form makes trays particularly alluring objects that represent the great diversity of taste within the literati world.
Spatulas, tongs, pokers, chopsticks and feathers were all used in incense burning rituals. Whether the scholar needed to shape the sand or ash, transfer a hot coal, fan the heat or carefully carry the incense from its box to the censer, he would reach into his incense tool vase, selecting the appropriate utensil. The shape of these vases varies dramatically, but they are immediately recognisable by their very small dimensions.