

## Jing-Style and Su-Style Furniture Aesthetics in Contemporary Design: An Emotion-as-Substance Perspective

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### ABSTRACT

Chinese traditional furniture is not merely a utilitarian object, but also a material carrier of cultural memory, aesthetic philosophy, and social values. Among its major traditions, Jing- and Su-style furniture of the Ming and Qing dynasties developed distinctive visual languages and emotional orientations: the former emphasized ritual order, authority, and grand structural beauty, while the latter foregrounded literati elegance, natural simplicity, and restrained refinement. Although recent studies have examined their historical craftsmanship, modern transformation, and emotional or cultural value, less attention has been paid to how their aesthetic traditions generate sustained emotional connections in contemporary design. Drawing on Li Zehou's theory of "Emotion as Substance," this study explores how Jing- and Su-style furniture aesthetics are inherited and transformed in contemporary Chinese furniture design. It adopts a qualitative case study approach and conducts comparative visual analysis of three representative brands: SHANG XIA, FNJI, and U+. The analysis is based on product images, brand narratives, design statements, and relevant historical literature. The findings show that contemporary continuation is not achieved through direct formal replication, but through the adaptive reorganization of material values, structural wisdom, proportional order, lifestyle imagination, and embedded emotional meanings. Warmth, dignity, calmness, craftsmanship spirit, and cultural belonging emerge as key emotional dimensions reactivated in the modern context. This study argues that the reinterpretation of traditional furniture reveals the living continuity of Chinese aesthetic culture and offers insights for culturally sustainable design, local identity construction, and non-Western approaches to modern design.

**Contribution/Originality:** This study contributes to the existing literature by explaining how Jing- and Su-style furniture aesthetics generate emotional continuity in

contemporary Chinese design. Drawing on Li Zehou's Emotion as Substance theory, it shows that tradition is reactivated through materials, structure, form, lifestyle, and cultural belonging rather than direct formal imitation alone.

## 1. Introduction

Traditional furniture is not merely an object that satisfies everyday functional needs, but also an important material expression of social order, technological wisdom, regional culture, and aesthetic consciousness. Across the development of different civilizations, furniture has consistently served as an important medium connecting people and space, behaviour and ritual, participating in the shaping of bodily posture, domestic lifestyles, and emotional experience (Saltik, 2025). In China, the Ming and Qing dynasties are commonly regarded as the peak period of traditional furniture craftsmanship and aesthetic development. Within this historical system, Jing-style furniture and Su-style furniture gradually formed two representative regional traditions, each embodying distinct cultural orientations.

Jing-style furniture was closely associated with the imperial workshop system and northern court culture. It typically possessed characteristics such as solemn grandeur, rigorous symmetry, refined material selection, and a strong sense of order, often carrying ritual values and hierarchical meanings (Chen, 2025). By contrast, Su-style furniture was rooted in the economic and cultural environment of Jiangnan and the traditions of literati life. It was known for elegant proportions, restrained decoration, sophisticated structure, and closeness to nature, reflecting the spiritual qualities of subtle cultivation, aesthetic self-awareness, and poetic living (Shen & Teng, 2024).

In recent years, Chinese traditional furniture has regained widespread attention within the field of contemporary design. Numerous contemporary furniture brands, independent designers, and cultural enterprises continue to draw inspiration from traditional furniture typologies, mortise-and-tenon structures, traditional craftsmanship, and spatial philosophy. This trend not only reflects a renewed awareness of cultural return, but also reveals the contemporary search for identity, sustainable lifestyles, and emotional resonance.

However, existing studies have not sufficiently explained how the emotional values embedded in traditional furniture aesthetics are transformed and reactivated in contemporary design practice. In particular, limited attention has been paid to how the distinct emotional orientations of Jing-style and Su-style furniture are translated into contemporary Chinese furniture design through materials, structure, form, and lifestyle expression.

Accordingly, this study argues that the relationship between traditional furniture and contemporary design should not be understood merely as formal borrowing, but rather as the contemporary continuation of emotional and aesthetic continuity. Li Zehou's theory of Emotion as Substance offers a useful framework for interpreting this relationship. The theory emphasizes that emotion is not a fleeting individual feeling, but a cultural foundation gradually sedimented through historical development (Li & Liu, 2011). From this perspective, the continuing appeal of Jing-style and Su-style furniture in contemporary design does not lie only in their external forms, motifs, or structural

features, but more importantly in the historically accumulated emotional values embedded in material tactility, structural logic, spatial order, and aesthetic restraint.

Based on this theoretical perspective, the central objective of this study is to examine how the emotional and aesthetic values of Jing-style and Su-style furniture are inherited, transformed, and reactivated in contemporary Chinese furniture design. The study is guided by the following research question: How are the emotional characteristics embedded in Jing-style and Su-style furniture transformed and reactivated in the contemporary design practices of SHANG XIA, FNJI, and U+ from the perspective of Emotion as Substance? Through case studies of these three representative contemporary brands, the article further discusses the continuing value of traditional furniture in modern lifestyles, particularly in relation to cultural identity, emotional sustainability, and contemporary design practice.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Studies on Jing-style and Su-style Furniture

Existing studies have examined Jing-style and Su-style furniture in a relatively systematic manner from the perspectives of craft characteristics, artistic style, cultural context, and formation mechanisms. Research on Jing-style furniture has shown that, under the influence of the imperial workshop system and northern court culture, it gradually developed artistic characteristics such as orderly lines, symmetrical proportions, elaborate decoration, carefully selected materials, and an overall sense of solemn grandeur. It also continues to offer inspiration for modern design in terms of functionality, minimalist style, and sustainability concepts (Chen, 2025). This line of research emphasizes that Jing-style furniture is not merely historical court furniture, but also embodies structural rationality and aesthetic order that can be reinterpreted in contemporary design.

By contrast, Su-style furniture was more deeply rooted in the economic and cultural environment of Jiangnan and the traditions of literati life. It emphasized elegant forms, flowing lines, rational structures, and the natural beauty of materials, and has been regarded as an important material carrier of literati aesthetic taste (Li et al., 2021). Further studies, using a 5W perspective, have analysed the reasons for the emergence of Su-style furniture in the Ming dynasty. They argue that its prosperity resulted not only from accumulated craftsmanship, but was also closely related to literati participation in design, the transmission of artisan skills, Suzhou's waterborne trade, the importation of high-quality materials, and broader intellectual trends in Jiangnan society. These studies further identify the essential characteristic of Su-style furniture as the integration of literati temperament with refined craftsmanship (Shen & Teng, 2024). Such findings indicate that the formation of Su-style furniture was both a result of technological development and a product of wider socio-cultural structures.

Overall, existing research has provided substantial insight into the stylistic features, regional backgrounds, and craft systems of Jing-style and Su-style furniture, offering an important foundation for understanding the regional genealogy of Chinese traditional furniture. However, most studies still focus on historical forms, decorative language, and causal explanations. Further investigation remains needed regarding the emotional orientations, lifestyle values, and continuing influence of these two furniture traditions in contemporary design.

## 2.2. Studies on Traditional Furniture in Contemporary Design

With the revival of traditional culture and the development of the design industry, an increasing number of studies have begun to focus on the transformation pathways of traditional furniture in contemporary design. Relevant research has gradually moved beyond simple formal borrowing toward systematic design innovation and cultural translation.

Some scholars have applied the method of “element deconstruction–parameter mapping–craft adaptation” to systematically translate traditional Huizhou window lattice elements into modern furniture design. They emphasize that the contemporary application of traditional elements must balance cultural expression, functional needs, and manufacturing feasibility (Wang et al., 2026). This study demonstrates that the modern transformation of traditional cultural elements is not merely a matter of visual reproduction, but also involves coordination among digital technologies, production logic, and user demands.

Other research, taking Ming-style furniture as an example, has argued from the perspective of cultural sustainability that the contemporary inheritance of traditional furniture should integrate multiple factors, including form, structure, material, decoration, and social environment, while adapting to modern lifestyles (Xue et al., 2024). This perspective further broadens the scope of traditional furniture studies, shifting the focus from formal language alone to questions of lifestyle and sustainable design.

At the same time, Huang et al., using the development of Singaporean Peranakan furniture as a case study, suggest that furniture design can contribute to cultural preservation through strategies such as cultural expression, modern innovation, brand promotion, social participation, and education. They further emphasize that traditional cultural products should become integrated into modern life and establish lasting connections through everyday use, narrative design, and human–object interaction (Huang et al., 2024). This research indicates that furniture is not only a design object, but can also serve as an important medium for cultural communication and social participation.

Overall, the incorporation of traditional furniture into modern design has gradually developed from formal translation toward systematic innovation. It now concerns not only morphological innovation and technological optimization, but also cultural dissemination and social engagement. However, such studies still tend to emphasize visible design elements, technical pathways, and implementation strategies, while offering insufficient explanation of how the deeper emotional values of traditional furniture are perceived, translated, and sustained in contemporary life.

## 2.3. Studies on Emotional Design and Cultural Continuity

In recent years, research on traditional cultural elements in contemporary design has gradually shifted from formal expression toward user experience, emotional identity, and cultural continuity. Relevant studies indicate that the value of cultural elements is not limited to visual decoration, but lies in their capacity to influence users' psychological feelings, identity formation, and lifestyle choices.

One study, based on the UTAUT model, conducted an empirical analysis of consumers' purchase intentions toward New Chinese-style furniture. The results showed that performance expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions had significant positive effects on purchase intention, whereas ease of use was not significant. This suggests that consumer acceptance of furniture with traditional cultural characteristics is influenced more by functional value, cultural identity, social evaluation, and external service support (Li & Siti Suhaily, 2025). From the perspective of consumer behaviour, this study demonstrates that the market acceptance of culturally traditional furniture is not determined solely by function, but is also closely related to cultural emotion.

At the same time, studies on New Chinese-style interiors in contemporary spaces have found that visual aesthetics, functional use, and individual lifestyle are the three principal dimensions influencing users' emotional experience. Comfortable atmospheres, natural materials, minimalist furniture, colour relationships, and cultural elements were all shown to effectively enhance users' feelings of pleasure and belonging (Rui & Firzan, 2025). These findings suggest that traditional cultural elements can continue to shape the emotional states and lived experiences of modern users through spatial experience.

Overall, the value of traditional cultural elements in contemporary design has moved beyond simple formal reproduction, and is increasingly reflected in their positive role in shaping emotional experience, lifestyles, and cultural identity. This provides an important basis for the present study to explore the continuity of traditional furniture aesthetics in modern design from the perspective of Emotion as Substance. However, most existing studies focus on New Chinese-style products, interior spaces, or consumer behaviour, while offering limited concentrated discussion on the emotional continuity embedded in the historical aesthetic systems of traditional furniture itself.

#### **2.4. Research Gap and Analytical Framework**

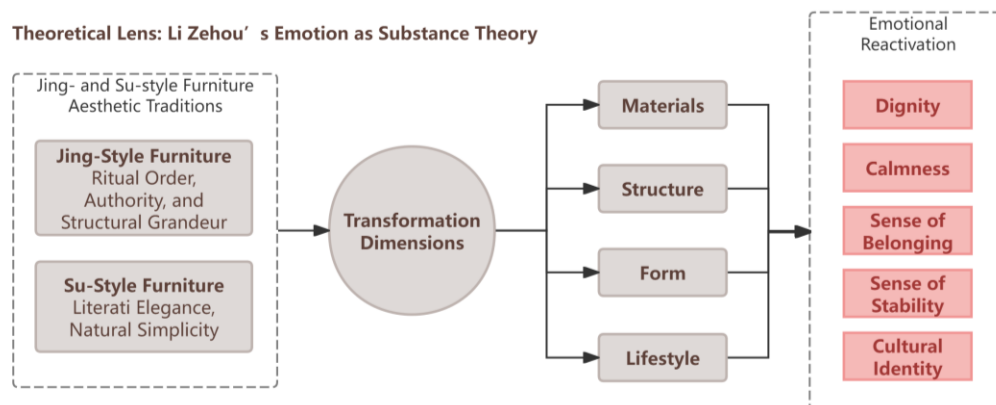
Existing studies have provided important foundations for understanding Jing- and Su-style furniture in terms of historical style, craft characteristics, modern transformation, and emotional design. However, most existing research has focused on traditional furniture forms, craftsmanship, styles, or design strategies, while paying relatively limited attention to how the emotional values embedded in Jing- and Su-style furniture are transformed and reactivated in contemporary Chinese furniture design.

To address this gap, this study adopts Li Zehou's theory of Emotion as Substance as its analytical framework. From this perspective, emotion is not understood as a temporary individual feeling, but as a cultural value gradually sedimented through history and embodied in material forms, spatial order, bodily experience, and aesthetic restraint. Traditional furniture is therefore not treated merely as a source of formal inspiration, but as a material carrier of historically accumulated emotional values.

Based on this framework, Jing-style furniture is understood as embodying emotional values such as ritual order, authority, dignity, and stability, while Su-style furniture is understood as expressing calmness, literati elegance, natural simplicity, and restraint. The study further examines how these emotional values are reinterpreted in the contemporary design practices of SHANG XIA, FNJI, and U+ through four dimensions: materials, structure, form, and lifestyle.

As shown in Figure 1, the analytical framework of this study explains how the aesthetics of Jing- and Su-style furniture are transformed into new emotional values in contemporary design. Li Zehou's theory of Emotion as Substance functions as the theoretical lens of this study, enabling traditional furniture to be understood not merely as historical form, but as a material carrier of culturally sedimented emotions. Within this framework, Jing-style furniture is mainly associated with ritual order, authoritative character, and structural grandeur, while Su-style furniture is associated with literati elegance and natural simplicity. The study then examines how these traditional furniture aesthetics are reinterpreted in contemporary design through four transformation dimensions: materials, structure, form, and lifestyle. These dimensions further explain how traditional furniture aesthetics are transformed into emotional and cultural values such as dignity, calmness, a sense of belonging, a sense of stability, and cultural identity.

Figure 1: Analytical Framework for the Emotional Reactivation of Jing- and Su-style Furniture Aesthetics in Contemporary Design



Source: Author's own creation

### 3. Research Methods

#### 3.1. Research Design and Case Selection

This study adopts a qualitative research approach combined with a multiple-case study design to explore how the aesthetics of Chinese traditional furniture are inherited and transformed in contemporary design, and how their emotional values continue to be expressed in modern life. A multiple-case study approach enables the identification of shared characteristics and divergent pathways through comparison across cases, thereby strengthening the explanatory power of the research.

Cases were selected through purposive sampling, whereby objects with the greatest interpretive relevance were chosen according to the research objectives. The final cases included three contemporary Chinese furniture brands: SHANG XIA, FNJI, and U+. These cases were selected for three main reasons. First, all three are highly influential and recognisable brands within the contemporary Chinese furniture field, with publicly accessible product materials, brand narratives, and design texts. Second, each engages with Chinese traditional furniture culture to varying degrees and demonstrates sustained design practices in relation to materials, structure, form, or lifestyle. Third, the three brands represent distinct transformation pathways: SHANG XIA emphasizes the integration of refined craftsmanship and contemporary design; FNJI focuses on natural

everyday living and oriental lifestyle aesthetics; and U+ highlights the unity of form and spirit, stressing the combination of rational proportion, modern functionality, and traditional values.

Taken together, these cases provide a relatively comprehensive representation of the diverse ways in which traditional furniture aesthetics are practiced and reinterpreted in contemporary Chinese furniture design.

### **3.2. Data Collection and Sources**

The research data were primarily drawn from publicly accessible and verifiable sources in order to ensure transparency and traceability throughout the research process. These sources consisted of three main categories.

First, product images and official design descriptions were collected from brand websites, product release pages, exhibition materials, and public promotional texts. These materials included furniture images, descriptions of materials, functional introductions, and design concepts, and were used to analyse formal language and design characteristics.

Second, design interviews, media reports, and published catalogues were reviewed. These included publicly available interviews with designers, brand features, exhibition catalogues, professional media coverage, and industry commentary. Such sources were used to understand the design background, creative intentions, and market context of the selected works.

Third, historical furniture scholarship was consulted. Academic books and journal articles relating to Jing-style furniture, Su-style furniture, and the history of Chinese traditional furniture were examined in order to identify historical formal characteristics, craft logic, and cultural meanings, thereby providing a historical reference for comparison with contemporary cases.

The integration of these diverse sources enabled the study to examine the continuing influence of traditional furniture aesthetics from both historical and contemporary perspectives.

### **3.3. Data Analysis Procedure**

The collected materials were analysed through a combination of comparative visual analysis and thematic analysis. The analysis was conducted in three stages.

First, the selected furniture cases were examined visually in terms of material, structure, form, proportion, decorative treatment, and modes of spatial use. Product images and official design descriptions were read together in order to identify visible design features and their stated design intentions. These features were then compared with the typical characteristics of Jing-style and Su-style furniture identified from historical furniture literature.

Second, the collected materials were coded according to four analytical dimensions: material continuity, structural continuity, formal transformation, and lifestyle transformation. These dimensions were selected because they correspond to four key

levels through which furniture aesthetics are transformed: the material level concerns tactility, texture, material ethics, and technological substitution; the structural level concerns joinery logic, load-bearing relationships, proportional order, and craft intelligence; the formal level concerns typology, silhouette, line, proportion, and visual language; and the lifestyle level concerns spatial use, bodily experience, daily rituals, and emotional atmosphere. Together, these dimensions make it possible to analyse traditional furniture not only as a visual form, but also as a material, structural, cultural, and experiential system.

Third, the coded findings were interpreted through Li Zehou's theory of Emotion as Substance. In this stage, the analysis moved from descriptive identification to theoretical interpretation. Design features such as carbon fiber substitution, visible or legible structural relationships, simplified traditional silhouettes, restrained proportions, natural materials, and lifestyle narratives were not treated merely as formal features, but were interpreted as ways through which historically accumulated emotional values—such as dignity, calmness, stability, intimacy, craftsmanship spirit, and cultural belonging—are reactivated in contemporary furniture design.

### **3.4. Research Validity**

To enhance the reliability and credibility of the analysis, this study employed triangulation across multiple data sources. Product images were examined together with official design descriptions, brand narratives, public interviews, exhibition materials, media reports, and historical furniture scholarship. This cross-checking process helped reduce reliance on a single source and enabled the study to compare visual evidence, textual explanation, and historical reference.

In addition, cross-case comparison was used to strengthen the interpretive validity of the findings. The three selected brands—SHANG XIA, FNJI, and U+—were analysed using the same four analytical dimensions, which allowed similarities and differences among the cases to be systematically compared. The study also avoids claiming direct design lineage between historical prototypes and contemporary works. Instead, historical references are used as typological and formal references to support the interpretation of broader aesthetic and emotional continuities.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1. Material Transformation: Re-coding Emotional Value Through Materials**

Material provides an important entry point through which traditional furniture aesthetics enter contemporary design. In Ming and Qing furniture, hardwoods such as huanghuali (黄花梨), zitan (紫檀), and hongmu (红木) not only shaped the tactile quality, structural strength, and craftsmanship of furniture, but were also associated with particular lifestyles, aesthetic taste, and cultural identity. Therefore, material transformation in contemporary furniture design is not simply a matter of replacing old materials with new ones. Rather, it concerns how new material choices and combinations can re-express the quality consciousness, craftsmanship spirit, and emotional values sedimented in traditional furniture.

The Da Tiandi series by SHANG XIA clearly demonstrates this pathway of material transformation. The series draws inspiration from traditional Chinese seating forms,

such as the official hat chair (guanmaoyi, 官帽椅) and the horseshoe-back armchair (quanyi, 圈椅), while adopting carbon fiber as its main material. According to SHANG XIA's official brand narrative, its limited-edition works celebrate artistry and heritage through collaborations with master craftsmen and contemporary artists, and reflect the brand's commitment to preserving traditional techniques while embracing modern innovation (SHANG XIA, n.d.). In this context, the use of carbon fiber should not be understood merely as a pursuit of technological novelty. Rather, it functions as a contemporary material language through which the craftsmanship spirit, material quality, and cultural temperament of traditional furniture are reinterpreted. Carbon fiber does not simply replace traditional wood; through lightness, strength, precision, and technological refinement, it allows the traditional emphasis on quality, craftsmanship, and formal order to gain new contemporary expression.

Unlike SHANG XIA, which uses high-tech materials to reinterpret the spirit of traditional craftsmanship, FNJI's material transformation focuses on bringing natural materials and natural atmosphere back into contemporary domestic life. According to the brand's official website, FNJI defines itself as a lifestyle aesthetics brand rooted in "oriental modern, natural and meaningful" design, and its concept of "Nature Bred, Home Nourished" emphasizes taking natural materials and simulating the state of nature (FNJI, n.d.). The brand insists on using wood as the main material while integrating leather, wool, stone, and other natural materials, aiming to return the aura of mountains and nature to everyday life. This suggests that FNJI's material use is not intended to create a retro effect, but to construct a quiet, natural, and relaxed domestic atmosphere through tactility, warmth, and material texture. The grain and warmth of wood, the softness of leather and wool, and the raw texture of stone together transform the natural sensibility associated with traditional furniture into a contemporary experience of comfort, intimacy, and emotional ease.

This approach is close to the aesthetic orientation of Su-style furniture, which values the natural grain of wood, avoids overly heavy decoration, and emphasizes the atmosphere of everyday life. It indicates that the natural sensibility and literati lifestyle embedded in traditional furniture do not have to be continued by copying old chair forms. They can also be transformed into comfort, stability, and a sense of closeness to nature in modern homes through natural materials and spatial atmosphere.

U+'s material transformation places greater emphasis on harmony, balance, and the creation of artistic mood. The brand does not rely on a single material to define its style; rather, across different products, it employs wood, stone, Xiangyunsha (香云纱) silk, stainless steel, leather, and other materials to create a balance between traditional temperament and contemporary aesthetics. Taking products such as the Rú Yì Pergola (ruihuajia, 如意花架) as an example, U+ simplifies and reconstructs the form of the Ming-style flower stand through the product officially named Rú Yì Pergola. The work uses wood to convey a warm and gentle texture, while the stone surface introduces a cooler material quality. The focus here is not on the rarity or decorative effect of the materials themselves, but on how contrasts between warmth and coolness, lightness and weight, solidity and emptiness create a quiet, restrained, and oriental display atmosphere. This indicates that U+'s material expression transforms the craftsmanship spirit, measured proportion, and oriental harmony embedded in traditional furniture into a modern sense of stability, order, and cultural warmth within contemporary domestic space.

Taken together, the three cases show that materials in contemporary furniture design are not merely physical components or tools for stylistic expression, but important media through which emotional values are carried and transformed. From the perspective of Emotion as Substance, materials matter because they allow the cultural emotions sedimented in traditional furniture to re-enter contemporary life through tactility, texture, warmth and coolness, weight and lightness, and everyday use. In this sense, the contemporary continuation of traditional furniture does not depend on the direct preservation of original materials, but on whether the quality consciousness, lifestyle attitudes, and emotional values once carried by traditional materials can be re-expressed through new material systems.

#### **4.2. Structural Transformation: Reinterpreting Stability, Order, and Craft Wisdom**

Structure is a key foundation that distinguishes traditional furniture from ordinary formal objects. The lasting aesthetic value of Ming and Qing furniture lies not only in the elegance of its external form, but also in the stability, proportional order, and craftsmanship wisdom embodied in its structural relationships. Mortise-and-tenon joints, supporting relationships, component proportions, and load-bearing logic together constitute the internal order of traditional furniture. Therefore, the contemporary transformation of traditional structure should not be understood as a mechanical restoration of historical joinery techniques. Rather, it involves translating the stability, order, and craftsmanship wisdom embedded in traditional structures into structural languages suited to modern materials, manufacturing methods, and living needs.

In SHANG XIA's Da Tiandi series, structural transformation is mainly reflected in the combination of traditional mortise-and-tenon construction logic with contemporary engineering materials. Taking the Da Tian Di Collection Carbon Fiber Large Arm Chair, SHANG XIA Red as an example, although the work uses carbon fiber as its main material, its structure is not produced as a single integrated form. Instead, it is organized according to a component-based construction and joining logic comparable to traditional mortise-and-tenon assembly. Publicly available interview materials indicate that the later production process of the carbon-fiber chair is, to some extent, close to solid-wood furniture making, requiring precise joining, sanding, fixing, and shaping. Its final stage also resembles a traditional lacquer process, involving repeated layers of coating and fine polishing (一条艺术, 2026). At the same time, the work clearly presents supporting relationships similar to the bawangcheng brace (霸王枨, a traditional diagonal supporting member), making the traditional relationships among support, stability, and load-bearing visible within a contemporary material system.

This structural treatment shows that SHANG XIA does not simply replace wood with carbon fiber, nor does it attach traditional structure to modern furniture as a decorative symbol. Instead, it translates the constructional wisdom and craftsmanship spirit of traditional furniture into a new material and manufacturing system. The repeated adjustment of details such as chamfer dimensions, backrest curvature, connection accuracy, and surface finishing further suggests that the design is concerned not only with external form, but also with the overall coordination among structure, bodily experience, and craft detail. In this sense, the Da Tiandi series transforms the precision, stability, and craft patience embodied in traditional mortise-and-tenon construction into technological beauty, structural reliability, and a refined sense of quality in contemporary design. Traditional structural wisdom therefore does not have to remain

attached only to wooden craftsmanship; it can also continue to convey stability, order, and craftsmanship spirit through modern materials, precision manufacturing, and hand finishing.

FNJI's structural transformation is more closely related to bodily experience in everyday life. Unlike SHANG XIA, which emphasizes high-tech materials and refined craftsmanship, FNJI does not deliberately foreground complex structural display or a strong sense of technology. Instead, through clear and natural relationships among components, its furniture presents a relaxed, stable, and approachable state of use. Judging from its publicly available product images and structural expressions, some of FNJI's wooden furniture still reveals the basic logic of mortise-and-tenon or woodworking connections. However, this structure is not presented as a highlighted technical symbol, but is integrated into the overall proportion, frame relationship, and bodily support of the furniture. At the same time, some products combine wooden frames with flexible materials such as canvas and leather, forming structural relationships through interweaving, wrapping, or support, thereby creating a more natural adaptability between the rigid frame and the flexible contact surface. This treatment does not directly reproduce any specific traditional joinery form, but rather gives contemporary expression to the traditional idea that structure should serve use.

This approach is related to the aesthetic orientation of traditional literati furniture, which valued relaxed proportions, structural simplicity, and natural use. In traditional furniture, mortise-and-tenon structures were not merely methods of connection; they also contributed to stability, continuity of lines, visual lightness, and bodily comfort. In this sense, FNJI's structural treatment continues the structural wisdom of traditional furniture. It does not rely on a strong technological effect, but creates a relaxed, quiet, and warm everyday living experience through the coordination of materials, restrained component relationships, and comfort in use. Thus, structure in FNJI's design is not only a technical means of support, but also a way of organizing bodily sensation and emotional atmosphere. It transforms the structural wisdom of stability, comfort, restraint, and natural use embedded in traditional furniture into intimacy, relaxation, and a sense of everyday stability in contemporary domestic life.

U+'s structural transformation is mainly reflected in its emphasis on structural stability and component order. Its design does not simply pursue the reproduction of traditional furniture forms, but seeks to create a safe, restrained, and orderly state of use through stable frame relationships, clear component organization, and refined connection details.

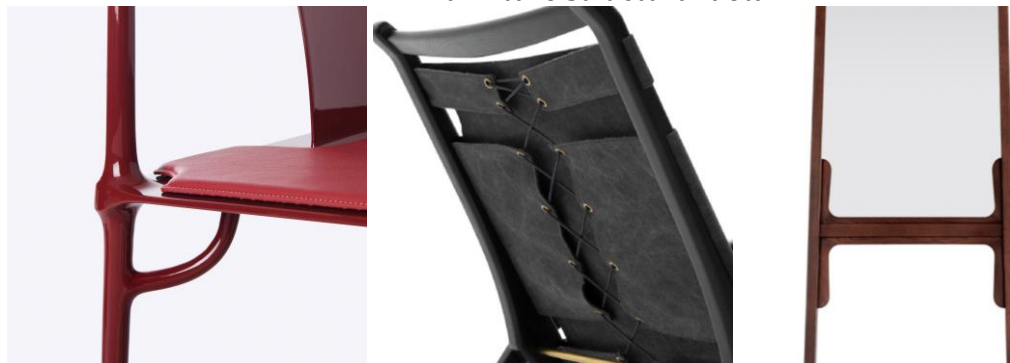
In specific products, U+ both continues traditional woodworking connections such as mortise-and-tenon joints and transforms structural components from traditional furniture into contemporary design language. For example, the decorative treatments in the Chéng Sè Mirror (chengseyijing, 澄色衣镜) and Chéng Xiàng Mirror (chengxiangyijing, 承象衣镜) can be understood as contemporary adaptations of the apron-like structural language found in traditional furniture. These treatments are not merely surface decoration. Instead, they create a more complete enclosing relationship between the mirror and the frame, giving the product a stronger visual sense of stability and safety, while also enhancing structural support and overall integrity. This shows that U+'s use of traditional structure is not a simple form of retro styling. Rather, it

transforms the traditional wisdom of integrating structure and beauty into a contemporary sense of safety, stability, and quality.

This structural expression also responds to the brand's emphasis on "beauty and emotion" (U+ Furniture, n.d.). The beauty of furniture does not come only from its external form, but also from precise structural treatment, detailed craftsmanship, and a sense of reliability in use. Through restrained lines, stable frames, and careful detail processing, U+ gives its furniture a calm, stable, and warm character within everyday space. Thus, structure in U+'s design not only performs a supporting function, but also becomes an important means of connecting traditional craftsmanship spirit with contemporary emotional life.

From the perspective of Emotion as Substance, structure is not merely the technical support system of furniture, but also an important medium through which emotional values are generated and perceived. Through connection methods, supporting relationships, component proportions, and detail processing, structure allows the stability, order, reliability, restraint, and craftsmanship spirit sedimented in traditional furniture to gain new expression in contemporary design. The structural beauty of traditional furniture is therefore no longer merely a craft heritage to be preserved, but an important way for modern furniture to reorganize bodily experience, living perception, and emotional order. As shown in Figure 2, the structural details of SHANG XIA, FNJI, and U+ illustrate how traditional ideas of support, joining, and component order are transformed into contemporary structural expressions.

Figure 2: Structural details of representative contemporary furniture cases: (a) SHANG XIA's Da Tiandi Carbon Fiber Large Arm Chair; (b) FNJI furniture structural detail; (c) U+ furniture structural detail.



(a) (b) (c)

Source: (a) SHANG XIA official website; (b) FNJI official website; (c) U+ Furniture official website.

#### 4.3. Formal Transformation: From Historical Typology to Contemporary Abstraction

Form is the most immediately recognizable aspect of traditional furniture aesthetics, but it is also the aspect most easily misunderstood as retro styling. Furniture types such as the horseshoe-back chair, official hat chair, console table, and flower stand in Ming and Qing furniture are not merely fixed historical forms. They also embody proportional relationships, line direction, bodily posture, spatial order, and aesthetic temperament. Therefore, the contemporary transformation of traditional form should not be understood as the direct reproduction of classical typologies, but as the abstraction of the formal logic and aesthetic spirit embedded in historical types.

SHANG XIA's Da Tiandi series demonstrates a transformation from traditional seating outlines to contemporary abstract form. Taking the carbon-fiber large armchair and official hat chair as examples, the designs clearly respond to the basic formal features of traditional Chinese horseshoe-back chairs and official hat chairs, including enclosing armrests, continuous back structures, upright sitting relationships, and stable overall proportions. However, these traditional features are not fully restored. Instead, through lightweight materials, slender lines, and restrained proportions, they are transformed into a visual language more suitable for contemporary interiors. The significance of this treatment lies in the fact that the uprightness, sense of order, and spatial centrality once associated with traditional seating are no longer expressed through heavy materials or elaborate decoration, but through lighter, simpler, and more contemporary forms. SHANG XIA's formal transformation is therefore not a retro reproduction, but a conversion of classical furniture outlines into abstract forms characterized by technological refinement and an oriental sense of order.

FNJI's formal transformation places greater emphasis on naturalization and everyday use. Unlike SHANG XIA, which more clearly responds to traditional seating outlines, FNJI does not always present a specific historical furniture type. Instead, it translates the lived atmosphere of traditional furniture into contemporary everyday furniture language through simple silhouettes, relaxed proportions, and natural imagery. The Hill Chair (qingshanyi, 青山椅) is a representative example. It does not directly copy the traditional horseshoe-back chair, but, while retaining a sense of enclosure, seated comfort, and oriental seating temperament, integrates modern design language and uses flowing lines to suggest the image of rolling green mountains. As a result, the chair presents a lively, natural, and quiet visual character.

The importance of this transformation lies in the fact that FNJI does not rely on obvious retro symbols to demonstrate its connection with tradition. Rather, it transforms the subtle, natural, and peaceful aesthetic emotions embedded in traditional furniture into a comfortable form more suited to modern domestic life. Its value does not lie in whether it completely preserves a specific historical chair type, but in how it allows the literati sensibility and natural feeling of traditional furniture to enter contemporary life through the abstraction of natural imagery, relaxed proportions, and restrained lines. FNJI's formal transformation is therefore not the reproduction of historical form, but the translation of traditional furniture's aesthetic temperament into intimacy, comfort, and poetic feeling within modern domestic space.

U+'s formal transformation places greater emphasis on the rational reconstruction of traditional typologies. Taking products such as the Rú Yì Armchair and the stainless-steel horseshoe-back armchair as examples, U+ does not directly reproduce traditional seating forms. Instead, it extracts basic outlines, proportional relationships, armrest structures, and linear features from traditional types such as the official hat chair and the horseshoe-back chair, and then transforms them through reduced ornamentation, adjusted scale, and strengthened linear order into furniture forms more suitable for contemporary spaces.

The Rú Yì Armchair is a representative example. Its form is not a complete copy of the official hat chair, but a reorganization of the upright proportion and armrest relationships found in traditional seating. The slightly lowered curvature of the seat provides more natural bodily support, while visually creating a stable, dignified, and restrained character. This treatment shows that U+'s inheritance of traditional form

does not depend on preserving complex ornamentation or historical outer shells, but on extracting the formal spirit of proportion, propriety, stability, and spatial order. Its formal transformation reflects a design orientation that preserves both form and spirit: traditional furniture is no longer copied as a fixed historical type, but is transformed into a restrained, clear, and contemporary design language.

Taken together, the key issue in formal transformation is not whether contemporary furniture visually resembles a specific historical type, but whether it can extract proportional relationships, linear order, and aesthetic temperament from traditional furniture and translate them into a design language suitable for modern life. From the perspective of Emotion as Substance, form shapes not only visual recognition, but also bodily posture, spatial perception, and emotional experience. Therefore, the formal beauty of traditional furniture is no longer merely a continuation of historical style, but an important way through which traditional aesthetic emotions enter contemporary life.

#### **4.4. Lifestyle Transformation: Contemporary Expressions of Traditional Ways of Living**

Lifestyle is an important dimension through which traditional furniture aesthetics gain continuing vitality in contemporary design. Ming and Qing furniture did not exist as isolated objects; rather, it was closely connected with hall arrangements, study culture, rituals of reception, bodily posture, and everyday self-cultivation. Jing-style furniture was more closely associated with ceremonial spaces, a sense of order, and identity expression, while Su-style furniture was more strongly connected with literati life, natural taste, and everyday aesthetics. Therefore, the contemporary transformation of traditional furniture involves not only the renewal of materials, structure, and form, but also the reorganization of traditional ways of living within modern domestic space.

SHANG XIA's lifestyle transformation is mainly reflected in its construction of refined oriental living and everyday ritual. Its design does not treat traditional furniture simply as retro display. Instead, through furniture, materials, craftsmanship, and spatial narrative, it creates a refined, restrained, and orderly mode of modern living. Although the horseshoe-back chairs and official hat chairs in the Da Tiandi series derive from traditional forms, in the contemporary context they no longer primarily serve traditional ritual order. Rather, they are transformed into expressions of cultural identity and symbols of quality living within urban space. This shows that SHANG XIA transforms the uprightness, sense of order, and craftsmanship spirit embedded in traditional furniture into a modern sense of ritual, refinement, and cultural confidence. Its significance lies in showing that traditional furniture does not have to remain within museum-like nostalgia; it can re-enter everyday life through contemporary materials, precise craftsmanship, and spatial experience.

FNJI's lifestyle transformation is more closely related to the literati life and natural everydayness associated with Su-style furniture. The brand emphasizes the idea of being "born in nature and settled at home," and its furniture, spaces, and brand narratives often revolve around natural materials, reading, tea drinking, exhibitions, social interaction, and slow living. Unlike SHANG XIA's emphasis on refined order, FNJI is more concerned with how furniture allows people to relax and how a quiet, natural, and inhabitable state of living can be formed in the modern home. Its furniture does not create a strong sense of ceremony; instead, through warm materials, relaxed proportions, and a gentle spatial atmosphere, it transforms the natural sensibility and







literati taste embedded in traditional furniture into intimacy, relaxation, and emotional ease in contemporary life. In other words, the value of FNJI does not lie in reconstructing a traditional study or literati space, but in translating its quietness, restraint, and natural feeling into everyday experiences that modern users can actually sense.

U+'s lifestyle transformation places greater emphasis on rational order and spatial propriety. The brand's design ideas of "rationality and li (礼, ritual propriety)," "quietness and atmosphere," and "beauty and emotion" show that its concern is not only with furniture form, but also with how furniture organizes relationships between people and space, people and objects, and people themselves. In U+'s design, li should not be understood as hierarchical ritual order in the traditional sense, but rather as a modern sense of proportion, propriety, and spatial order. Whether in the Rú Yì Armchair, the Tīng Yuán Console Table (tingyuantiaoji, 听园条几), or other display-oriented products, its designs tend to create a quiet, balanced, and orderly domestic atmosphere through restrained lines, stable proportions, and detailed craftsmanship. This suggests that U+ transforms the ethics of scale, craftsmanship spirit, and oriental harmony embedded in traditional furniture into stability, security, and cultural warmth in contemporary life.

From the perspective of Emotion as Substance, lifestyle transformation is important because the emotional value of traditional furniture does not exist only in materials, structure, or form, but also in the everyday relationships formed between people and furniture. When the sense of order, naturalness, stability, and cultural warmth embedded in traditional furniture is transformed into use experience, spatial atmosphere, and emotional perception in modern living, traditional furniture aesthetics are no longer merely a continuation of historical style, but become emotional resources that can be continuously experienced and practiced in contemporary life.

To further clarify the analytical relationship between the selected contemporary cases and traditional furniture typologies, Table 1 summarizes the representative cases, typological references, and main transformation focus. The historical examples listed in the table are used as typological and formal references rather than as evidence of direct design lineage.

Table 1: Representative Cases, Typological References, and Transformation Focus

Brand	Contemporary Case	Typological References	Transformation Focus
SHANG XIA	 <p data-bbox="328 707 655 869">Da Tian Di Collection Carbon Fiber Large Arm Chair, SHANG XIA Red Source: SHANG XIA Brand Official Website</p>	 <p data-bbox="746 707 1066 936">Ming dynasty huanghuali horseshoe-back armchair with openwork backrest (huanghuali toudiao kaobei quanyi) Source: Shanghai Museum Official Website</p>	Using carbon fiber, lacquer-like finishing, and refined fabrication to reinterpret the quality consciousness and craftsmanship spirit of traditional seating.
FNJI	 <p data-bbox="328 1283 655 1379">Hill Chair Source: FNJI Brand Official Website</p>	 <p data-bbox="746 1283 1066 1514">Ming dynasty huanghuali horseshoe-back armchair with openwork backrest (huanghuali toudiao kaobei quanyi) Source: Shanghai Museum Official Website</p>	Retaining the enclosing feeling and quiet sitting experience of traditional seating while translating natural imagery into a relaxed contemporary domestic form.
U+	 <p data-bbox="328 1939 655 2036">Rú Yì Armchair Source: U+ Brand Official Website</p>	 <p data-bbox="746 1917 1066 2047">Ming Dynasty Rosewood Fan-Shaped Official's Hat Chair (Ming zitan shanmianxing)</p>	Extracting upright proportion, armrest relationships, and a sense of stability, and transforming them into restrained furniture language suitable for contemporary spaces.

nanguanmaoyi)  
Source: Shanghai Museum  
Official Website

Note: The prototype references are intended as typological and formal references rather than as evidence of direct design lineage. They indicate the historical furniture types and structural features relevant to the analysis, but do not suggest that the contemporary cases are directly based on these specific objects.

#### 4.5. Cross-case Synthesis: Emotional Reactivation Beyond Formal Imitation

The analysis of materials, structure, form, and lifestyle shows that the contemporary continuation of Jing- and Su-style furniture aesthetics is not achieved through the restoration of historical styles or the borrowing of traditional symbols. Rather, it is realized through the reorganization and reactivation of emotional values embedded in traditional furniture. The key issue is not whether contemporary furniture visually resembles a specific historical object, but whether the material consciousness, structural wisdom, proportional order, and lifestyle emotions sedimented in traditional furniture can be re-expressed in a new design context.

In this process, materials, structure, form, and lifestyle do not operate as separate paths of transformation. Instead, they together constitute the mechanism through which the emotional values of traditional furniture enter contemporary life. Materials give tangible expression to quality consciousness, natural sensibility, and cultural warmth; structure transforms stability, reliability, and craftsmanship spirit into bodily perceived safety and order; form continues the aesthetic temperament of traditional furniture through proportion, line, and enclosure; and lifestyle further transforms furniture from static objects into spatial atmosphere, bodily experience, and emotional perception within modern living. In this sense, the contemporary value of traditional furniture no longer lies in whether it “looks traditional,” but in whether it can continue to generate emotional meaning in new living contexts.

From the perspective of Emotion as Substance, this continuity is not primarily a continuity of form, but the renewed generation of historical emotion through new materials, new structures, new forms, and new ways of living. The uprightness, order, stability, and craft precision associated with Jing-style furniture, together with the naturalness, subtlety, literati sensibility, and everyday intimacy associated with Su-style furniture, are reorganized in contemporary design and transformed into modern experiences of refinement, comfort, stability, and cultural belonging. To clarify this cross-case relationship, Table 2 summarizes how SHANG XIA, FNJI, and U+ transform traditional furniture aesthetics through the four dimensions of material, structure, form, and lifestyle, and how these transformations correspond to specific emotional values in contemporary design.

Table 2: Cross-case Comparison of Transformation Dimensions and Emotional Values

Brand	Representative Case	Material	Structure	Form	Lifestyle	Emotional Value
SHANG XIA	Da Tian Di Collection Carbon Fiber Large Arm Chair,	Carbon fiber; lacquer-like finish; high-tech	Component-based logic; precise joining;	Lightweight outline; restrained proportion; modern	Refined urban living; everyday ritual	Refinement ; order; stability; cultural confidence

	SHANG XIA Red	craftsmans hip	visible support	abstraction		
FNJI	Hill Chair	Wood; leather; wool; stone; natural tactility	Wooden joinery; flexible support; bodily comfort	Mountain imagery; soft lines; relaxed proportion	Slow living; natural domestic atmosphere	Calmness; warmth; intimacy; relaxation
U+	Rú Yì Armchair	Wood; stone; Xiangyunsh a; stainless steel; material balance	Stable frame; clear component s	Upright proportion; restrained lines; slight seat curve	Spatial balance; quiet order	Stability; propriety; safety; cultural warmth

## 5. Conclusion

This study adopts Li Zehou's theory of Emotion as Substance as its analytical framework to examine how the aesthetics of Jing- and Su-style furniture are inherited, transformed, and reactivated in contemporary Chinese furniture design. Through case studies of three representative brands—SHANG XIA, FNJI, and U+—the study finds that the contemporary continuation of Chinese traditional furniture does not primarily depend on the direct replication of historical forms. Rather, it occurs through the reorganization of emotional values sedimented in traditional furniture across the dimensions of materials, structure, form, and lifestyle.

The findings show that the sense of order, calmness, craftsmanship spirit, measured proportion, and poetic living embedded in traditional furniture have not disappeared with changes in historical context. Instead, they are transformed in contemporary design into new material expressions, structural logic, formal languages, and spatial experiences. Specifically, SHANG XIA reinterprets the quality consciousness and craftsmanship spirit of traditional furniture through high-tech materials and refined craftsmanship; FNJI transforms the natural sensibility and literati temperament of traditional furniture into intimacy and relaxation in contemporary life through natural materials, relaxed proportions, and the idea of slow living; and U+ translates measured proportion, oriental harmony, and craftsmanship spirit into stability, order, and cultural warmth in modern domestic space through rational scale, structural stability, and artistic mood. In this sense, Jing- and Su-style furniture should no longer be understood merely as two separate historical categories, but as traditional design resources that can be continuously transformed.

This study makes three main contributions. Theoretically, it introduces Li Zehou's theory of Emotion as Substance into the study of traditional furniture and contemporary design, showing that traditional furniture aesthetics are not merely formal heritage, but historically sedimented emotional values. Practically, it proposes four analytical dimensions—materials, structure, form, and lifestyle—as a framework for understanding how traditional furniture can be transformed without relying on superficial imitation. Culturally, it demonstrates that the aesthetics of Jing- and Su-style

furniture can still provide contemporary life with cultural identity, everyday stability, aesthetic belonging, and emotional support.

More broadly, the contemporary transformation of traditional furniture should not remain at the level of motif borrowing or symbolic collage. Instead, it requires a deeper understanding of the material ethics, structural wisdom, bodily scale, spatial relationships, and philosophy of living embedded in traditional furniture. Only in this way can traditional culture be transformed from static heritage into a living design resource and continue to participate in the construction of contemporary lifestyles. The material wisdom, structural logic, and aesthetic ethics embodied in Chinese traditional furniture also offer useful insights for discussions of culturally sustainable design, local identity construction, and non-Western pathways to modern design.

This study mainly focuses on cases of contemporary Chinese furniture brands and therefore has certain limitations. Future research may include a broader range of brand cases, user experience studies, designer interviews, or cross-cultural comparative analysis in order to further examine how the emotional values of traditional furniture are transformed in different design contexts, and to expand the theoretical depth and practical value of traditional furniture research within a global design discourse.

### **Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate**

This study was conducted in accordance with established research ethics guidelines and did not involve human participants, human subjects, or the collection of personal data. The research employed a qualitative case study and comparative visual analysis based solely on publicly accessible materials, including official brand websites, product images, brand narratives, design statements, and published academic literature. Accordingly, informed consent was not applicable.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare no conflict of Interest.

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